

Himachal Pradesh elections: Will the rhythm of democracy survive?

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Shimla has been my second home after Delhi since 1991, the year I joined the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS) as Fellow. During this long period of my association with Himachal Pradesh, I have been fortunate to have visited a larger number of cities, towns and a few villages of Himachal Pradesh. I got an opportunity to interact with people from all walks of life: agriculturists, business persons, administrators, politicians, lawyers, students, litterateurs, critics, journalists, artists, and teachers while staying and touring in the state. I also had conversations with the porters (popularly known as *khans*) who bore the burden of cities/towns on their back. I met and talked with labourers, migrants and locals, engaged in the construction work of buildings, roads, bridges etc.

In the process of such interaction I discovered that the civil society here readily accepted the phenomenon of Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) forming the government in alternate elections in the state. The development-work, work-culture, literary-cultural-educational activities of the state continue normally without any significant changes under the governance of both the parties. The work/business of BJP people does not stop under Congress-rule and Congress people's work/business goes on usually under BJP-rule. The work of the general public of Himachal Pradesh, who elect the governments of both the parties, also continues uninterrupted.

This year, after a long gap of time, I stayed in Shimla for almost the entire summer. Once again, I undertook a long journey - Shimla, Rampur Bushahr, Sarahan, Sangla, Kalpa, Puh, Sapilo, Tabo, Kaza, Losar, Chandratal, Batal, Koksar, Keylong, Udaipur, Manali, Kullu, Bilaspur, Mandi, Shimla - of 10-12 days in the last week of June and first week of July. During this journey, I had conversations with the people I met about their assessment and choice in context of the upcoming state assembly elections. Most people gave me the same answer - "The elections are quite far. Haven't decided anything. Will see what to do." People's response remained more or less the same till the month of September.

After the announcement of the elections, people started becoming more vocal on many issues. The salaried people started talking about restoration of the Old

Pension Scheme (OPS) that was abolished during the tenure of late Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Farmers engaged in agriculture and horticulture started complaining about the rapidly increasing cost of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides etc. When I asked farmers about the financial help given every month under the Prime Minister's Kisan Yojana, many of them replied that this is *baniyagiri*, the government gives one thousand and snatches back four thousand from farmers. Like the other parts of the country, unemployment and inflation are two serious problems in Himachal Pradesh as well. Both these issues are matter of discussion and concern among the people. The anger of the people became visible over the Agniveer scheme of recruiting youth in the armies. When I discussed this issue with some retired army officials/soldiers of Himachal Pradesh, they were very upset about it. They said that this scheme is not only wrong in terms of career of youth driven by the desire to be recruited as soldiers, but it is also a threat to the discipline and strength of the armed forces.

Employees of different departments have their own grievances. The fact that since 2017 there has been an increase in the menace of drugs in the state is a serious issue that worried people. I asked the educated people's opinion in education field about the private universities being established in Himachal Pradesh and the New Education Policy NEP in the midst of the election related discussions. But I was surprised and also disappointed to find that few of them have much clarity regarding these two contentious issues. That is perhaps one reason why these issues are not raised by anyone in the election campaign.

Now most of the above mentioned issues can be seen floating in the context of the coming elections. The Congress is raising many of these matters and promising to solve them. These issues have found place in all the newspapers which cover the election campaign properly. But it is not certain that the Congress will get its electoral benefits because people also raise the question of the disintegration of the Congress. Even if the infighting within the Congress at the national level does not affect Himachal Pradesh elections so deeply, people complain that after the death of Raja Virbhadra Singh, there is a clear lack of unity in Himachal Pradesh Congress.

The BJP has been raising the question since the beginning that there are too many contenders for the chief minister's post in the Congress. However, this argument of BJP does not hold much weight. The Congress state president and late Virbhadra Singh's wife Pratibha Singh is not contesting the election. According to

the congressmen, she is not the chief ministerial candidate, and will continue to work for the party organization. Only the names of senior Congress leaders Kaul Singh Thakur and Sukhwinder Singh 'Sukhu' remain among the chief ministerial candidates. Both of them are sharp minded and experienced leaders, and tough contenders to the current Chief Minister of BJP, Jai Ram Thakur.

During my current stay in Himachal Pradesh, from summer till now, I met some people who unequivocally stated that they are supporters of Modi and will vote for Modi only. Those who say so include the people who normally and traditionally voted for the Congress in the past. It is not without reason that the BJP is completely depended on Narendra Modi's 'charisma' to divert public attention from a chief minister who has a weak image, and also from the public issues. The entire media management has also been focused in that direction by the election campaign of the party. The Prime Minister has made four-five visits to Himachal Pradesh in view of the elections. In his recent election meeting in Solan, he has appealed the voters to cast aside the government, chief minister and candidates, and vote solely in his name.

By adopting this strategy, the BJP has obviously tried to send a message to the voters that the Congress does not have a leader like Modi. Its message to the rebels of the BJP is that dissent against the party is a rebellion against Modi's leadership. However, it's time that BJP itself should realise that by doing this as a political party and government, is it showing its weakness or its strength? Almost all the newspapers have observed that the Congress is facing a shortage of financial resources in the elections. On the other hand BJP, under its new political style, rolls down money like water on election campaigns. Several crore of rupees have been spent on the Prime Minister's visits to Himachal Pradesh alone. This has become a matter of discussion even among the people of the state. Again, the BJP has to think whether such dependence on money power is its weakness or strength?

From Dr. Yashwant Singh Parmar to Virbhadra Singh of the Congress and from Shanta Kumar to Prem Kumar Dhumal of Jana Sangh/BJP, there has been a sense of acceptance for them in general public and civil society. This healthy pattern of democracy has resulted in good educational and economic standards of the people of the state. The education and awareness in women and the youth can also be attributed to the democratic process here. The new political style of

RSS/BJP which came into prominence since 2014 has visibly broken this democratic rhythm of Himachal Pradesh which has existed there since its creation. It remains to be seen whether the people of Himachal Pradesh can protect this beautiful rhythm of democracy in the assembly elections to be held on November 12, 2022, or lead it to a dead end.

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