

Weak but sensible voices should be listened to in the path of democracy

Prem Singh

I have been living in Shimla, the capital of Himachal Pradesh, for the past one month. In my general conversations with many people living in Shimla from different parts of Himachal Pradesh, there has been some discussion about the Lok Sabha elections also. The election is to be held in the last phase on four Lok Sabha seats here. One day five-six BJP workers came to my house in Summerhill. As soon as I opened the door, a senior worker among them said, 'We have come for Modiji . . .' I welcomed them smilingly and asked them to first tell me about your candidate contesting from Shimla constituency. Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of the country, everyone knows him. Pointing to the candidate's photo printed on the poster they were holding, they said, 'Yes, yes, he is our candidate from Shimla.'

While taking the election material from them, I apprised them that my vote was not here. I will definitely read your pamphlet. I kept talking about the elections with those workers for ten-fifteen minutes. They were not in a hurry. At my quarry they told me that there is a close contest on the Shimla seat. They further said that BJP's victory in Hamirpur and Kangra seats is certain. The Congress may win the Mandi seat again. (The BJP candidate had won from Mandi in 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Congress won this seat in the midterm elections held in 2021 due to the death of the elected MP.) I asked why it seems that there is no tough competition in Mandi? The senior worker explained that such candidates can be fit in big cities. It is difficult for them to make a mark in a small city like Mandi. They all seemed to be very ordinary level workers of the party. During the entire conversation, they presented their assessment of the elections with a lot of neutrality and objectivity. I bid them farewell by saying my best wishes for your efforts.

A day before this, the Congress workers had come to our colony. I could not meet them. They had left their election material on the ground floor and put up posters in the compound and left. Maybe they thought that since the house is closed on the ground floor, there will be no one on the upper floors either. Or they may have been too lazy to climb to the upper floors. If they had come, I would have had some intimate discussions on elections and politics in Himachal Pradesh with them as well. I was happy to see that in Himachal, at least in the cities, the tradition of going door-to-door and distributing election material and

asking for votes for the candidate still exists. And this work is done with ease. This is a positive activity in the path of democracy.

I mentioned this episode because the BJP is fighting the elections in the name of Prime Minister Modi and the high command. From the BJP's side, a sticker type poster with the pictures of Prime Minister Modi and the BJP national president, who comes from Himachal Pradesh, has been put up separately in the entire state. Even on the posters/handbills appealing for votes for the BJP candidates, there are big pictures of Modi and the party's national president above the candidate's picture. Along with them, small-sized pictures of some other senior and new leaders of the state are put.

The Congress, like in the previous assembly elections, is in the election fray on the strength of its state-level leadership. The state party organization has distributed the gist of the Congress party's national manifesto and the state government has distributed details of its work done in the last fifteen months as election material. Small pictures of the high command leadership have been put on the top of the posters and pamphlets, which also include pictures of the state-in-charge and the state-president. The posters mainly have pictures of Chief Minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu and the candidate with him. In short, the state Congress is not asking for votes in the name of the high command.

This is a good sign for democracy. Often the dictate of one person or family prevails in the name of the party high command. This gives rise to autocracy on one hand and sycophancy on the other in politics, which is fatal for democracy. If there is no high command culture in parties, it will be beneficial for democratic consciousness, democratic institutions and constitutional federalism.

Journalists reporting on the elections in Himachal Pradesh have reported that this election is complex and full of challenges for the Congress. In the recently concluded Rajya Sabha elections, six MLAs of the ruling Congress had violated the party whip and voted for the BJP candidate against the party's nominee. The Congress had called it a conspiracy hatched by the BJP to topple the elected government. However, it is not a hidden fact that the internal power struggle of the state Congress also played a role in the Rajya Sabha election episode of Himachal Pradesh. The BJP candidate elected to the Rajya Sabha had also joined the BJP from the Congress about one and a half years ago. He has been an old Congressman, and was the working president of the state Congress when he left the party.

Elections are being held on the seats of the six MLAs whose Assembly membership had been cancelled, along with the Lok Sabha elections. The BJP has given tickets to all those six leaders. It is well known that there has been a series of sharp allegations and counter-allegations between Chief Minister Sukhu and the rebels, which has intensified during the elections. If these rebel candidates win on BJP tickets, it will not only have a bad impact on the state Congress organization but will also put the state government in trouble. If they lose the elections, the Congress will be strengthened at both the organization and government levels.

As it appears from the Prime Minister's speech in Mandi, the threat of the BJP toppling the Congress government in the state is not over yet. Apart from many people who claim to be unaffiliated to any political party, some BJP supporters also told me in casual conversation that people in Himachal Pradesh do not look favourably upon the attempt to topple an elected government. Even if the ruling party has its own internal quarrels. They believe that the healthy rhythm of democracy that has been maintained in Himachal Pradesh should not be broken. In the din of populist slogans/promises and exaggerated predictions, such sensible voices should be heard in the interest of democracy.

It is also worth noting that there is clear dissatisfaction in the BJP over the decision to give party tickets to all the rebels of the Congress. They say that an attempt is being made to convert the Himachal BJP into Congress. According to them, even the argument that the Congress has a history of toppling state governments is not justified. The BJP should be allowed to remain BJP and the Congress should be allowed to remain Congress. A writer, and a small businessman friend of mine in Shimla do not like the current Congress high command. Yet they say that the Congress should continue to exist in the political arena. They have the same belief about the BJP.

This kind of thinking of citizens gives an important indication for Indian politics. After three decades of neo-liberalism or finance capitalism, it is an open truth that ideology has almost vanished from mainstream politics. Even the walls of parties are crumbling. Any leader can join or leave any party/alliance just for the sake of power. If serious activists and vigilant citizens of all parties start opposing this trend, then some way may remain open for the restoration of ideology in politics.

(The writer associated with the socialist movement is a former teacher of Delhi University and a fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla)