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People's Verdict

The verdict handed out by the people in the recently-held state assembly elections of Haryana and Maharashtra has demonstrated some defining characteristics that entail the likelihood of delineating patterns of future electoral outcomes of state assembly polls in the near future. In the first place, it is the people and not political parties that have halted the unstoppable electoral juggernaut of the BJP and has also exploded the myth of this party's so-called invincibility in just a few months after the general elections of May 2019. Secondly, the electorate have deftly sifted the chaff of 'virtual' off the grain of 'real'. Besides, the regional satraps have been able to reassert their relevance in challenging the dominance of the BJP such as the NCP in Maharashtra.

Viewed in a broad spectrum, the electoral outcomes of the assembly elections in Maharashtra and Haryana have not been as encouraging as the BJP would have wanted them to be. In Maharashtra, the BJP-Shiv Sena combo have formed the government after a week-long bargaining by Shiv Sena to dictate its terms. Undoubtedly, the BJP-Shiv Sena combine has crossed the majority mark; nevertheless, with a reduced tally since 2014, the likelihood of Shiv Sena continuing its efforts of exerting pressure on the BJP cannot be ruled out. In Haryana, the BJP had boasted of securing more than 75 of 90 seats and in the final tally it failed to even reach the majority mark of 46 and had to secure the support of the newly-formed Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) to form the government. The verdict given by the people in both these states does not augur well even for the Opposition, given the fact that the Opposition could have performed better, had it gone with more hard work and well-concerted strategy. The drop in the number of seats in Haryana made the task of the BJP harder in cobbling together a coalition government and the party were left with no other option except to accept the terms of the JJP. Interestingly, the BJP had won all 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana in May this year and had perhaps become too euphoric to write off the beleaguered Congress and the fledgling JJP. The hard work put in by the state leadership of the Congress helped the party to comfortably emerge as the second largest party with its increased tally as compared to 2014. Apart from anti-incumbency factor, what went against the BJP was perhaps the failure of the BJP chief minister to dispel the perception that the state government was being remote-controlled from New Delhi.

In Maharashtra, apart from the BJP-Shiv Sena combine, the NCP-Congress alliance was another major contender for power in the state. Admittedly, the BJP-Shiv Sena combo had cobbled comfortable majority to form the coalition government, albeit with reduced margin as compared to 2014, the NCP-Congress alliance had impressively improved their total tally as compared to the past. The credit for impressive performance of the NCP-Congress alliance goes to 78-year-old NCP leader Sharad Pawar, who, despite his ill-health and some leaders of his party having joined the BJP bandwagon, addressed more than 60 rallies in the good old-style campaigning even in the age of social media to help his party register impressive number of seats. Improved performance of the Congress party, which contested the elections in alliance with the NCP, could be attributed to the fact that the party, as one expert points out, "mostly rode piggyback on the old man's back (Sharad Pawar) with its top leaders absent from the campaign trail." Party's star campaigners like Sonia Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi were almost a no-show and Rahul Gandhi emerged on the scene after more than half the campaigning was over and addressed just six rallies. Most of the state-level Congress leaders nursed their own respective constituencies by raising their own resources without any fiscal and other support from Congress headquarters in New Delhi. Besides, the state unit of the party was ridden with factionalism and internal feuds.

Verdict of the people has seemingly thrown up new realities. It has proven that the BJP is vulnerable to anti-incumbency and that Modi magic is no more substitute for non-governance or mismanagement. Besides, the Opposition needs to be united as a viable alternative to the BJP.

— BK