**A curious race to bet on**

BY J A W E D N A Q V I 2023-05-02

PRE-POLL surveys are often wrong, but they`re also sometimes spot on. The Kannada outlet Eedina has projected a clear victory for the Congress in the forthcoming Karnataka assembly elections, well beyond the 113-seat simple majority. If the prediction indeed comes true, credit has to go in no small measure to Rahul Gandhi`s long march of which he spent several crucial days in the southern state. A BJP win would put the Gandhi charisma in question.

That said, the assembly elections will be held on May 10, and votes counted on May 13. Exactly a year forward, general eleetions are lined up for mid-May. They should see Prime Minister Modi in a bid for his third consecutive term. That race though would get critical time to tweak the strategies for the contestants. In January 2024, four other states go to polls. Their outcome should indicate India`s political drift more accurately.

Between Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Telangana, in the fray next year, the BJP governs just one, and that it didn`t win cleanly. Madhya Pradesh had returned a Congress government. The BJP breached it with defections and installed its own rule. The Modi magic may or may not gel with voters; it certainly has a mesmeric lure for defecting MLAs. Several state governments bear witness.

One clue to the BJP`s less-than-confident campaign in Karnataka, which complements the survey, can be found in Home Minister Amit Shah`s reported warning at an election rally. He said that an opposition victory in Karnataka would leave the state open to communal riots.

The desperation apart, it could be interpreted as suggesting the BJP will not accept a negative result tamely.

Is the opposition rejoicing at the Congress`s cheerful prospects though? Makes a strange question considering that everyone admits to being in a hurry to see off Mr Modi before he finishes off the opposition. The countdown starts with Karnataka. Strangely enough, a Congress victory in the important state doesn`t enthuse the opposition equally. With several contenders in the opposition ranks eyeing the top job, a Congress success doesn`t spell serious harm to the BJP in the larger picture.

Apart from individual ambitions of leaders,the animus towards the Congress more precisely towards the Gandhi family runs deep not only on the political circuit, but has roots in less discussed allergens lurking in shadowy alcoves. A backgrounder is required.

It took two consecutive assassinations to see that a Nehru-Gandhi family member would not form governments again. But the party could, which it did under two prime ministers. Between the two, Sonia Gandhi was pitchforked into the political arena. Remember she had failed to stop Rajiv Gandhi from what had become a killingfield for the family. It was the redoubtable Pranab Mukherjee scrupulously isolated by Rajiv Gandhi who led the melee in which the Congress president Sitaram Kesri was locked up in the bathroom and replaced by an unprepared Sonia Gandhi.

Sonia and Mukherjee represented opposite interests. Mukherjee was idolised in the corporate world with a pronounced soft corner for the Ambani family. Sonia`s husband had spelt out his objective in starkly opposite terms.

Addressing the Congress centenary celebrations in Mumbai in 1985, he had warned `the moneybags` to get off `the backs of Congress workers`.

It was a language that Rahul Gandhi would happily learn to speak, naming names of the powerful, unafraid. He says he is paying the price, the stoic smile notwithstanding. Having his Lok Sabha membership voided over the flimsiest of legal cases concerning alleged defamation at a time when rapists and killers deemed close to the government were being set free Rahul needs a kindly judge who would not let him be punished for seven years, not just two he wassentenced to. If the case is not closed, Gandhi would be unable to contest the 2024 election, being convicted for a two-year term.

How did Sonia Gandhi fare? As soon as she looked like succeeding to instal a Congress government in 1999, howls of protests rent the sky against her Italian origin. Two women politicians from the BJP threatened to shave their heads if she became prime minister. The fear permeated corporate alleys and was expressed through a handy media.

Maharashtra satrap Sharad Pawar parted ways. His sole argument at the time for setting up the rival Nationalist Congress Party was the `foreigner issue`. After the Vajpayee government (despite the accolades of the Lahore summit) lost the trust motion by a vote in April 1999, Sonia Gandhi called for the Congress to be given a chance. She informed president Narayanan her coalition had the support of the needed 272 MPs and she expected the number to increase.

Just then the Samajwadi Party that she was counting on, withdrew its consent for a Congressled government only to provide lifesaving anchor to Manmohan Singh in 2008. Powerful forces are guiding politics.

Whether the tide will turn for Rahul Gandhi is difficult to say. What`s clear is that an opposition unity is eminently possible but sans Gandhi. In fact, Mamata Banerjee has set the ball rolling by tapping Bihar`s Nitish Kumar. Will it be a secular alternative? Yes, that is the glue. Will it go hard on the Adani affair? Not after Pawar`s fulsome praise for the business house. Should there be a JP-like movement against Modi as suggested by some? The JP movement was shored up by the RSS. Who will lead this one? Will the former Jammu and Kashmir governor`s bold interview charging the Modi government with failure to protect troops in Pulwama in 2019 go against the prime minister? It`s currently the best bet to campaign on. The Karnataka outcome is expected to start a curious race, however, one in which the fastest jockey is being forced to dismount near the finishing post, by circumstances that resemble a rigged casino.  The wnter is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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