**A defeat that carries hope**

BY J A W E D N AQ V I 2022-03-15

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi is his own best fan. He believes, as do his supporters, that the BJP`s victory in four of the five assembly poll results last week carries in its pouch, as it were, the outcome of national polls due in 2024. He could be right as he often is, albeit for the wrong reasons. He could also be wrong, as one knows the word to be. BJP victories in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur were indeed as unexpected for the opposition as they were overwhelming for his fans. But the BJP`s rout at the hands of relative greenhorns the Aam Aadmi Party in Punjab is not an aberration, as Modi`s fans would have us believe. It may be the writing on the wall.

Many of the BJP`s critics have by habit gone into an emotional rebound against the Congress leadership, blaming the Gandhi family for the opposition`s resounding defeat. The family responded with what comes naturally to them: offering to quit. As Sonia Gandhi reminded worried members of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), `For me the Indian National Congress is important. We are ready to make any sacrifices. If it is felt that the Gandhi f amily is not able to do it, then we three are ready to step back.

Unanimously, reports say, the CWC rejected her suggestion and everyone, including Ghulam Nabi Azad, the leader of the pack that had voiced criticism of the leadership, expressed the dire need for the family not to leave. `We have never questioned your leadership, only flagged the flaws in the party management,` pleaded Azad, who controversially received the Padma Bhushan award from Modi recently.

The nub of the matter is that the Gandhis have kept studiously aloof from businessmen who own the press and, some say, the government. During Manmohan Singh`s premiership too, Sonia Gandhi ran a parallel watchdog with the help of eminent activists to mitigate the fallout of the Congress`s market-friendly policies, knowing they were not always conducive to the idea of a harmoniously knit India as visualised by its founders. When Mr Modi, therefore, calls for a Congress-free India, he is actually canvassing for a Congress bereft of the Gandhi leadership. Else, the BJP has co-optednearly all the Congress giants, including Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and Subhash Chandra Bose.

Criticism of the Gandhis flows from this genuine fear of assault on crony capitalism under their watch a possibility expressed clearly by Rahul Gandhi in recent years. Three politicians have shown the courage to name the tycoons who rule the roost. And the media, not surprisingly, reviles all three. Navjot Singh Sidhu and Arvind Kejriwal are the other two critics of big business. All three have been called anti-national in turn.

Going back in time, way before Sonia Gandhi would lose an election for her party, in the dayswhen she actually won them, there was a chorus of protests sponsored by worried moneybags, no doubt against her foreign birth. Two women leaders of the BJP threatened to tonsure their heads if she came close to power. The animus thus has little to do with her victories or defeats.

AAP`s resounding performance in Punjab was equally prompted by its campaigns against corruption and a diligent watch over business interests in government. This was precisely the position the state`s farmers took when they were out protesting for a whole year against the now repealed anti-farmer laws. They approved of AAP.

Understanding the BJP`s victory in Uttar Pradesh needs a closer look at the results. Ishaan Gera of the Business Standard has computed useful details to show how the races in Uttar Pradesh, Goa and Manipur were tighter than the previous contest. Which means that the induction ofsmaller parties, crucially in Uttar Pradesh for example, the sectarian All India Majlis-i-Ittehadul Muslimeen had cut into game-changing opposition votes. The fractious opposition didn`t help either. In Goa, Mamata Banerjee`s Trinamool Congress and AAP spoiled the chances for the Congress party. Both are ambitious regional groups averse to the Congress establishing itself in the leadership role when push comes to shove two years from now. The Congress needs to consider the conflict seriously. Rather than offering to step back as leader of her party, Sonia Gandhi would win all-round gratitude if her party would step back and shepherdratherthanseek tolead a coalition that can defeat the BJP.

Consider Gera`s findings. The median margin of victoryin Goa, Manipur and Uttar Pradesh dipped perceptibly from 2017. In Goa the median margin was 1,991 in 2022, compared to 3,946 in 2017. Ten seats were won with a margin of fewer than 1,000 votes and six were won with less than 500 votes, lower than before.

In Manipur, candidates led in 10 seats with a less than 500 votes margin, and 22 were with less than 1,000 votes margin, a new low from 2017.

Uttarakhand witnessed the median margin of victory increase from 6,717 to 7,333. In terms of seats, there was a status quo with candidates leading in two seats with less than 500 votes margins and leading in five with less than 1,000 votes margin.

Punjab was the only state where the number of seats won with lesser margins declined.

In Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Punjab, the vote share of the top two parties increased compared to the last. In Uttar Pradesh, the vote share of the top two parties, led by Samajwadi Party, increased from 61.9 to 73.4 per cent between 2017 and 2022. The Wire computed that in 2018, out of total 4,139 assembly seats in the country, BJP had 1,516, out of which 950 seats were from six states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, UP, MP and Rajasthan. There`s little to support Mr Modi`s declaration of victory in 2024. If anything, he struggled in the recent races.  The writer is Dawn`s correspondent in Delhi.

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