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Last year's story?

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The Congress resurgence in Uttar Pradesh in last year's general election has generated hope among the party faithful in Bihar. Following Rahul Gandhi's message at a Bihar rally — “what we did in UP, we will also do here” — party workers almost believe that this election could end their two decades of political oblivion in the state. It would be naïve to not recognise the dangers of over-interpreting the UP Congress revival saga. Notwithstanding the specificities of the two states, the Congress should not expect a replay of UP results in Bihar, for four reasons.

First, Rahul and Sonia's charismatic appeal may pull large crowds, but that may not convert into votes for the party. The reason is that the Congress lacks a coherent organisational structure in Bihar. The party organisation not only helps in gathering and transmitting accurate information upwards but also in the micro-management of the electoral process. Making a Dalit (Mukul Wasnik) the general secretary in charge of party affairs in the state and a Muslim (Mehboob Ali Kaiser) the president of the Congress Pradesh Committee may do well only as far as the paperwork of electoral arithmetic is concerned. The party lacks clear formulae for selecting candidates. And showcasing the number of enrolments for the party's youth wing doesn't add much weight — “young voters” in this country

have not emerged as a distinct political bloc so far. It needs local leaders who have the ability to mobilise the masses, and not a leader from Delhi.

Two, Indian voters are mature enough to de-link national and state politics. The thesis that even during national elections, state-level factors play a primary role in shaping the voter's choice is not borne out in India. Thus, a vote for the Congress in UP in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections could well have been a vote in favour of the Congress for control over the Central government and not necessarily a sign of change in UP's state politics.

Third, there is no denying that the Congress's decision to contest alone would make the Bihar polls three-cornered in many constituencies. However, the experience of the last two decades suggests that the electoral landscape in the state has always been guided by coalition calculations. The incumbents were only challenged when the opposition shed their differences and managed to form strong pre-poll alliances — whether the erstwhile Janata Dal's alliance with the Left Front in the first half of the '90s or the BJP-Samata Party [later Janata Dal (United)] coalition in the latter half, which got the better of its opposition. Lalu Prasad survived the assembly elections in 2000 because the BJP-led coalition was highly divided and NDA partners ended up fighting each other in nearly half of the state's seats. Jharkhand's separation in 2000 completely changed the equations. In the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP-JD (U) were routed by the combined might of Lalu Prasad, Ram Vilas Paswan and the Congress. But this coalition withered away before the 2005 assembly elections. The fractured verdict of this election gave a fresh lease of life to Nitish Kumar's tune of "nutan Bihar" (new Bihar) and the BJP-JD (U) won the majority in the November 2005 elections. The BJP-JD (U) alliance humbled the divided opposition in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. Electoral fortunes were made or marred by the intensity of political polarisation.

Fourth, the Congress's achievement of 10 per cent vote-share in the last elections in Bihar has given the party workers a much-needed boost. But the party should not forget that this increase in vote-share was for two reasons — the party contested in nearly all the seats (from four seats in 2004 to 37 in 2009) and Congress candidates like Meira Kumar, Mohammed Asrarul Haque, Shakeel

Ahmad, Sadhu Yadav, Lovely Anand or Ranjeeta Ranjan rarely relied on the party machinery for votes.

The non-alignment strategy may not be fruitful for the Congress in this election, but is likely to reap benefits in future. It rectifies the party's mistake of the last two decades. In states where two or more regional parties became more powerful (UP, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Jharkhand), the Congress inconsistently aligned with one or the other. In the process, both regional parties grew at the expense of the Congress. Rahul Gandhi seems to have realised that the party can only grow if the cadres perceive an opportunity within the party either through contesting elections as party nominees or by being appointed to some post within the party structure. Thus, a pre-poll alliance may better the electoral fortunes of a party in the short run, but it simultaneously weakens the party organisation.

The ekla chalo ploy is pretty clear — stop the growth of the RJD and the LJP, and in doing so, attract Dalit and Muslim votes. The critical mass gained from these two communities would act as a magnet for others. It would not be surprising to see the Congress snub more regional parties in future — watch out for a replay in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, both up for polls next year.

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