

Congress ‘hawa’ to class divide — four observations in the run-up to Karnataka election

You don’t see any big billboards; there are no wall writings, very few flexes, and rarely do you spot a publicity vehicle. Elections have gone underground.

Yogendra Yadav

On the third day of our field travel in Karnataka, we finally encountered a voter who was switching away from the Congress to the Bharatiya Janata Party. We were in Yelahanka, a constituency on the outskirts of Bengaluru, having travelled much further to Chikmagalur and back the previous two days. Our group included Professor A. Narayana of Azim Premji University, an encyclopedia on Karnataka politics, N. A. M. Ismail, a veteran Kannada journalist, some of my Eddelu Karnataka campaign colleagues, and Sanket Nagaraj Angadi, the sociable and sharp interpreter for non-Kannadigas. We were doing what I love most during elections – travelling without a plan or destination, stopping wherever, and speaking to whoever is interesting and willing.

So far, we had met all kinds of potential voters: Many Congress, BJP and Janata Dal (Secular) loyalists, some who were switching to the Congress, a few to the JD(S), and a handful who wouldn’t tell. But we had not come across a single person who had voted for the Congress in the previous election and was planning to vote for the BJP. A clear sign of a hawa, I said to my colleagues.

Congress ‘hawa’

This is when we came across this man — age around 40, working for a transporter — sipping coffee with two of his friends at a street corner. Sanket confirmed what we had surmised from this person’s broken Hindi: He was indeed switching to the BJP. This was like ‘sighting’ a tiger toward the end of a long jungle safari. I asked him what he expected of the BJP government. “BJP gareeb ko maar dega [BJP will finish the poor]” was his blunt answer in Hindi. I was perplexed and asked him how he compared the incumbent CM Basavraj Bommai with Siddharamaiah, the previous Congress CM. This time, he responded in Kannada: “How can you even think of comparing the two, sir?” his hand gestures placed Siddaramaiah way up and needed no translation.

Why, then, was he switching away? He smiled and named a leader from his locality who shifted last month from the Congress to the BJP. This leader has stood by us in thick and thin, so we must stand by him now, he said. This was the closest we came to anyone moving away from Congress to BJP this time. All other shifters were from the BJP or JD(S) to Congress (in one case, from Congress to JDS).

Clearly, the hawa this time is unmistakably with the Congress. In 2018, the party enjoyed a 2 percentage point vote share lead over the BJP (despite getting much lesser seats). All the credible pre-poll surveys I have seen this time suggest a widening of this gap. The poll done by Cicero in January estimated it to be 4 per cent, C-Voter recently said 6 per cent, Lokniti-CSDS survey for NDTV seems to suggest something similar, while the eedina.com survey projected a 10 per cent lead for the Congress.

Anti-incumbency

This hawa is directly linked to people's perception of the incumbent Bommai government. We did not meet any BJP voter enthusiastically endorsing it. The moment we broached its performance, we encountered sheepish silence or a sly smile. The common refrain was: "We are not voting for him. We are voting for Modi." No BJP voter defended the Bommai government against allegations of "40 per cent sarkara" (government that extracted a 40 per cent cut on every project). They would just hit back: "So, what is new? Which government is not corrupt? Was Congress not corrupt?"

This sentiment is duly reflected in survey data from different sources. In my years as a survey researcher, I found that the best proxy for voting intention was a simple question: Should the incumbent government get another tenure? Last time, when the Congress lost the election, the ratio of those who were for and against giving the Congress government another chance was 1:1. This time, the proportion of No outweighs Yes in every survey — around 1.7:1 in the CSDS survey and 2:1 in the Eedina survey. If the BJP still has an upper hand in some seats, it is because some of the MLAs enjoy a good track record of local work. Eedina survey recorded a lower anti-incumbency against ruling party MLAs as compared to the state government. Karnataka has routinely thrown out the incumbent government for many decades now. This one does not seem to be an exception.

Class divide

The lower you go down, the stronger is the hawa. No poor voter had a good word for the BJP. As I mentioned in my article last week, there is a clear rich-poor divide among the voters of Karnataka. The richer the voter, the lower the lead for the Congress, and vice versa for the BJP. This was starkly evident on the ground. As soon as you speak to a poor person, they begin to rattle off everyday consumption items that are unaffordable now. Gas cylinder prices top the chart. "Earlier, we were making do with firewood. They gave us gas. Now we can't go back to firewood. Nor can we afford the gas cylinder," said one.

Almost everyone complained about the cut in free rice from 10 kg per person per month during the Congress' time to 5 kg now. Petrol and diesel prices come next. Farmers complained about fertiliser prices. They mock the Kisan Samman Nidhi: "They give us 2,000 but take away more than that from our pocket." More ordinary people know about GST and blamed it for the higher prices than you might imagine.

It is not that poor voters are not voting for BJP but that it is largely a vote for the local candidate or an obligation under a patron-client relationship. Even those among the poor who intend to vote for the BJP do not consider it their party, except in the coastal region where the BJP has developed deep roots.

Siddaramaiah is the darling of the poor. The “poor” is, of course, a subjective term, not limited to the official poverty line. This could easily include three-fourths of the population in villages and well over half in the cities. Losing favour with the poor is to lose the support of an overwhelming majority of the voters.

No communal overtones

Finally, this hawa is not blocked by the wall of communal divide. Hindu-Muslim tensions do not feature in routine political conversation in Karnataka. No one we spoke to brought up the Hindu-Muslim issue unless specifically asked. That might sound strange in a state that has regularly generated headlines for the wrong reasons: Hijab, azan, love jihad, and now, Bajrang Dal. It would be rash to conclude that communal polarisation has withered away from Karnataka. Everyone who knows the state says that communal prejudices and anxieties have percolated deep down in popular consciousness. But one thing is sure: The voters of Karnataka are not foregrounding this issue in this election.

This is in sharp contrast to what I heard while travelling during the 2022 Uttar Pradesh elections. Almost every Hindu voter in the state, even those who voted for the Samajwadi Party (SP), spoke about suraksha (protection) with a communal tinge. In Karnataka, even the Muslims, at the receiving end of State-sponsored bigotry, don't raise this issue. There is an unspoken anxiety, a pressure to prove their nationalism, an eagerness to underline communal amity. For Hindus, the communal issue has slipped in their order of priority; for Muslims, it is a decision to push it down. I doubt if the BJP's desperate and predictable attempt to raise communal temperature would alter this basic fact in the last week before the polls.

There is a strange emptiness that marks the roads in the run-up to the polls in Karnataka. You don't see any big billboards; there are no wall writings, very few flexes, and rarely do you spot a publicity vehicle. Elections have gone underground, and, apparently, become more expensive than ever before. They say you spend about Rs 10 crore to lose an assembly election in Karnataka; the price tag for winning a seat is about Rs 20-40 crore, if not more. No party shies away from this game, though the BJP may be outspending the Congress. Street corner gossip is all about who has bought whom, who defected to which side, and who is going to undercut whom. The usual business of what we call democracy.

Yet, an invisible hand — or perhaps four of them — is fanning a hawa that feels like Bengaluru's cool evening breeze after a day of scorching sun. All signs point to an electoral mandate that can counter the hegemonic power. As they say, dissent is like water. It finds its way.