

Maharashtra election result - BJP and Shiv Sena in a power tussle

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Padma Priya(Host)- On Thursday, the election results for 286 assembly constituencies of Maharashtra were declared. The Bharatiya Janata Party secured a total of 105 seats and its alliance partner Shiv Sena 56 seats. The Congress won 44 seats and The nationalist congress party led by Sharad Pawar won 54 seats. Despite the Shiv Sena and BJP alliance bagging majority seats, the tussle for power continues with Sena Chief Uddhav Thackeray wanting a chief ministerial position for Aaditya Thackeray in two years time. On Saturday, while addressing party MLAs, Thackeray also hinted that the party would explore other options if the BJP didn't honor the 50-50 power sharing agreement, presumably agreed upon during the Lok Sabha elections. Hardening stand on an equal division of the chief ministerial tenure, Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut last night told NDTV and I quote "We will see how they do not share the post of the chief minister. Both the parties agreed on 50:50 power-sharing formula. There is no need to explain it in detail."

To understand more about what these results mean for the politics of Maharashtra, The Suno India Show reached out to Tushar Dhara, a journalist with the Caravan magazine.

So today we will be talking about the Maharashtra elections and the result so to speak. Was it as you expected the result or was there something out of the blue that happened in these elections?

Tushar- No it wasn't as expected and since I am not an expert in Maharashtra, there are people more qualified obviously but it wasn't as expected because the sense I got while tracking Maharashtra was that, it was going to be a clean sweep for the BJP and I think BJP also expected their target was to cross halfway mark on their own. Things really didn't quite plan out that way and that was a surprise.

Host- So right now you have a situation I mean before going to elections Shiv sena in BJP have agreed that it will be a 50-50 sort of a poll alliance. What does that mean could you explain to our listeners what does these results mean in terms of the alliance, are we going to look at equal representation of both the members of the political party in the state cabinet. How is it going to play out according to you?

Tushar- So this is a strange reversal of roles. In 1989 or 1990 alliance, Shiv sena was a senior partner and the BJP was a junior partner in Maharashtra. But since 2014 that was reversed, BJP has become the senior partner when compared to Shiv Sena. Though the Shiv Sena and the BJP are in an alliance, shivsena behaves like an opposition party, it's the opposition in residence actually, if I can use that term. 50-50 alliance was basically a rearrangement where, they actually think it should have been split in terms of the seats shared, in terms of seats contested or cabinet posts between the two parties would be shared in a 50-50 ratio. However

the BJP convinced shiv sena to contest on fewer seats in Maharashtra. So the 50-50 alliance meant that both the parties would be contested 144 seats. But the shiv sena contest 124 seats, and the BJP contested 164 seats. Now the halfway mark is 144, BJP's hoped to cross 144, it has got 105 seats which means that it gives shivsena more bargaining power. And over the last few days we have seen election results, we have seen that shiv sena has kind of reminded BJP of 50-50 formula. I think they are probably trying to drive a hard bargain and they say it's not a warning, they say it's just a reminder, but no one knows what is that.

Host- Right now there are rumours that I am hearing on media that shiv sena has you no bargaining hard for Aditya thakre to be given the deputy CM post, how feasible this is, there are possibilities of them considering that amount of space to someone as young as Aditya thakre?

Tushar- Well you know I have heard the rumours too, and all I can say is that there is no confirmation to deny these rumours. they will remain in the realm of speculation until we see some arrangement actually happening after Diwali. Having said that, what I do know is that Aditya thakre is the first person from the thakre clan who has contested elections. And there is a rule apparently Maharashtra politics that the chief minister, whoever becomes chief minister has to become an MLA, has to be elected in direct elections. The fact that he has won from worli, it qualifies him on that parameter but also people say that he is too young right now, he is too inexperienced and he would like to get some more experience. but whether the BJP actually concedes the chief minister post to shivsena that's another question but things are in flux right now. That's it.

Host- Another interesting thing that has been happening is the NCP is keeping its options open and has also said that while there is nothing wrong in shiv sena demanding the BJP to keep the 50-50 deal to honour that deal, is there any possibility of the NCP and the Shiv sena thinking let's get together because I think then they will have marginally more close to 110 seats together. Is that a possibility or is that too much a far fetched thing to think of? How did you think, earlier I remember before the elections it seems like Maharashtra is going to be a no contest, the BJP and the shiv sena alliance is going to sweep it. Now if you look at it it seems like a pretty strong contest. How did this happen what changed in the last few months maybe, since the Lok Sabha elections that changed the tide?

Tushar- So the first thing to remember is let's not compare lok sabha to assembly elections, because that's not like to like comparison that is an apple to oranges comparison. A better comparison would be 2014 assembly elections to 2019 assembly elections. Having said that the strike rate of the BJP, by strike-rate I mean the number of seats won out of the number of seats contested. So in 2019 the BJP strike rate is about 64% in assembly elections, in 2014 it was 46.3%, let's say 46%. However this is also not like to like comparison because the BJP contested 216 seats in 2014. In 2014 elections BJP and shivsena contested on their own they weren't in an alliance. The alliance only came into being after the elections. In 2019 as I have mentioned earlier, BJP contested 164 seats. So the strike rate of 164 is 64%, and the strike rate of 216 in 2014, is 46. Actually the strike rate of BJP has gone up. Secondly number of seats is

not a correct indicator of popular support. So let's look at the vote share, the vote share of the BJP in 2019 is 27.8 and in 2014 it was 25.6. So it's more or less the same and marginally increase. These are provisional numbers because we don't have the data for 2019 assembly elections. The BJP leadership for some reason or for their own reasons the strategy going on is that we will focus on muscular nationalism. So the stress or main campaign themes were the abrogation of article 370 in Kashmir, muscular nationalism, Pakistan, etc. That doesn't seem to have resonated with voters, remember Maharashtra has seen a lot of agrarian distress. There has always been an agrarian distress even before Devendra Fadnis, this time there was a drought in Marathwada and Vidarbha particularly in the last years there has been no rain. Inversely in western Maharashtra 2 months ago there were floods, right from the belt from Pune to Kolhapur, there have been close to 14000 farmers suicides in the last 5 years. Now all these seems to have gone against BJP, because the BJP did not address any of these issues, the BJP seem not engaged with agrarian distress. NCP, Sharad Pawar, that's an interesting story. See the impression I got by travelling in Maharashtra was that Sharad Pawar of the NCP was putting up a fight because the Congress was not really putting up a fight. There was this incident in, I think it was a couple of days or during the last days before campaigning stop, where Sharad Pawar addressed a rally in Satara in rain. He didn't have an umbrella, he just stood there and address in election rally and the video that went viral. You know it was a kind of a very defined kind of video. The image of Sharad Pawar addressing voters, there was also this ED case that the central government filed against Sharad Pawar which generated some amount of sympathy for the NCP and Sharad Pawar. Another factor was that there was a lot of defections from the NCP and the Congress particularly in western Maharashtra to the BJP and Shiv Sena. Now if you look at these defections they are all sugar barons who have, who control cooperative sugar mills across Western Maharashtra. Now the cooperative sugar mills have been the bastion of the NCP and the NCP has basically used the sugar cooperative mills to build a patronage system, like in order to produce political capital. The BJP in the last 5 years has dislodged the Congress and NCP from its Western Maharashtra sugar cooperative citadel. However the feeling was that once the BJP dislodge the Congress and NCP and got all these people on their side, it will gain some amount of voter base in Western Maharashtra. That hasn't happened, so the people chose to vote for the Congress and NCP in western Maharashtra. In Maharashtra the central leadership was mostly absent, Sonia Gandhi didn't campaign in Maharashtra that's understandable because she is not there, Rahul Gandhi also didn't address too many rallies and I also think Priyanka Gandhi even addressed a single rally. So it was largely left to the Maharashtra unit to fight these elections. The fight in Maharashtra was really led by Sharad Pawar and the NCP and I think Congress was just tagged along. But let's not forget that the Congress also has some amount of electoral dominance in Maharashtra. And it still has these sugar cooperative and these cooperative, some of the politicians in congress are sugar barons. For instance in Marathwada, Latur former chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh son contested. They own about five sugar factories in Latur, so the Congress still has some kind of network on the ground.

Host- In Maharashtra, I know you mentioned this again briefly, but I would like you to expand your thoughts on this in terms of this whole conversation around nationalism, Article 370, and

the hindutva politics also, how much of it actually played the role or it didn't play the role, and how much of the local issues also played a role?

Tushar- So as I mentioned earlier the BJP tried to make muscular nationalism an issue, but rather the issue didn't find any attraction. However the opposition also didn't raise the issues on the ground, for instance the agrarian distress was a big issue, well not distress but in Mumbai the municipal corporation is the only municipal corporation in the country that is in surplus, all other municipalities in Maharashtra are in a deficit position in terms of revenue. So if you go to a town in Maharashtra you will see that the municipal corporations need money for regeneration of important areas and so on. All these health, education, infrastructure, job losses, you know Maharashtra is an industrialised state, and the economic counter has taken a toll, so agrarian distress, job losses, health education, irrigation you know all these issues were issues on the ground that the voters were expecting the party to speak upon but neither the opposition nor the BJP kind of raised these issues. no we need to be a little cautious on that because there is no evidence if voters are opposed to abrogation of article 370, there is no evidence of that right. So they might have welcomed article 370, but the feeling could be that ok now it's done, however we are in Maharashtra we are not in Kashmir, why aren't you talking about the issues on the ground in Maharashtra.

Host- So in 2014 we see that the BJP has been witnessing a rise in its power in the state of Maharashtra, what does this mean for the other political parties and what does this actually mean for the regional politics, the marathwada kind of politics in Maharashtra, is it still here to stay or are we seeing a very different kind of politics now emerge where the regional parties whether it's the MNS or the others are slowly losing their bastion?

Tushar- So you mean the Maratha politics right. So let me give you a brief kind of overview of the political streams in Maharashtra. There have been two political streams in Maharashtra, the first is an upper caste kind of a stream, let's call it Pune stream. Upper caste in Maharashtra are very small in number and they had, the control the leaders of country production. are the members of this small community are the ones who have dominated the art, literature, bureaucracy, media and so on. So the characteristics of the similarity, affinity seeking westernised. In opposition to this was second stream of politics which is centred around Kolhapur, Satara and so on, and this was the Maratha Street. Now, what's the characteristics of this stream, they were very Pro Marathi, they were very proudly, they defined themselves as the opposition to the mainstream. Now because the cultural production or the cultural domain was dominated by the upper caste stream, close to 35% of Maharashtra population started cooperative. You know they are the ones who own the cooperative movement in Maharashtra. so what did was they started sugar cooperative, they started financial cooperative, poultry, real estate housing society and so on. And they used this to gain an advantage in the political sphere. Now the cream of the cooperative was the sugar cooperative, Western Maharashtra, Marathwada the sugarcane is grown in these regions and the sugar cooperative which is you know the factories used the income that generated from the cooperatives, into political power, not just political, but building networks and everything that is a cash world. Now during the last

five years there has been an interesting churn in Maharashtra not just Maratha politics. The upper caste and OBC consolidated behind the BJP, the Maratha voters have separated to regional parties the Congress and the NCP which came out of the Congress and the Shiv Sena. What Fadnavis has done in the last 5 years is the BJP have been aggressively appealing to the Maratha vote. So for instance about 2-3 years ago in fact the Maratha reservation what is the response of the BJP, they granted reservation to the Marathas. And the hope that this move would kind of get them the Maratha vote. They also aggressively went after the sugar barons who are primarily Maratha, in Western Maharashtra who are all in the Congress and the NCP. And since the Lok Sabha elections a lot of these sugar barons deflected from the Congress and the NCP to the BJP. Now the BJP is hoping to split the Maratha vote and gain certain portion of the Maratha vote. You know all this created a sense of unease among the BJP's existing social base. And there was a fear that if Marathas recaptured that space, reconsolidate that space behind the BJP, now if the Marathas also going to come in then what can happen to us. So there is a very interesting churn in Maharashtra politics. What happens now is actually interesting, we have to wait and watch what happens now. So you have seen that the Maratha vote is not entirely deserted the NCP and the Congress, I mean the election results show that. The BJP tried very very aggressively to court the Maratha vote. So what happens here that's an important question.

Host- Another interesting development was I think the AIMIM, I think they won this time two seats, they won one seat last time and they managed to get one more this time, correct me if I am wrong here, they have won 2 last time and they have won 2 this time, but they have lost the 2 seats they won last time and they have won 2 others. What is your take on them? Like AIMIM is moving outside of the Telugu states, like Telangana and getting into Maharashtra, you know I was reading somewhere that this is Asaduddin's dream to expand the influence of AIMIM. What's your take on this?

Tushar- So the AIMIM only contests in Hyderabad, it doesn't contest in Telangana. So AIMIM's bastion is the old city, they have won Lok Sabha seat in Hyderabad and 7 number of assembly seats. Historically in Andhra, I don't think they have contested any seat. Even in Telangana they haven't shown any interest in contesting outside the old city. Now in the Lok Sabha elections there in an alliance with the Prakash Ambedkar, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi. And in fact the AIMIM, I think they have won one or two seats in Aurangabad. Right now, I mean I also read the article which you are referring to, so their strategy I think seems to contest in areas where they have a kind of Muslim population that can get them seats, in the assembly or the local body elections. But two seats, I am not sure, that's not convincing, so I am not sure. Well you know Maharashtra has also been part of, remember parts of Maharashtra especially the Marathwada has been part of Old Nizam street. So there are cultural similarities between Telangana and parts of Maharashtra. However that's not the case in Bihar or UP. So this is just a hypothesis I have it maybe easy for the AIMIM to win seats in Maharashtra. Radha Dan in Bihar or UP.

Host- Was economic distress and slow down in manufacturing, how much of that did actually play into elections. Do you think it played a role or it wasn't so much?

Tushar- It probably did. I was actually asking this question to some of you and economic distress for Indian population has come in two ways. The first one is job losses, unemployment and the second is inflation. Modi government track record on inflation actually has been good, especially food inflation, which is one of the major key factors of anger among the middle class and food purchasers actually. Maharashtra is an industrialised state, there have been job losses and economic slowdown have been felt but the mood is still not clear. So right now we don't have data so I don't want to say anything definitive but the results of this election could be interpreted as some kind of anger on the issue of job losses, on the issue of industrial shutdown and job losses.

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