

## What does the Haryana Election results mean for the BJP and the Congress?

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**Padma Priya(Host)-** On Thursday, Haryana ended with a hung assembly with the ruling party BJP emerging with 40 seats but still six short of the halfway mark needed to form the next government. The split verdict triggered hectic political activity with two independents, the infamous Gopal Kanda and Ranjeet Singh boarding flights to Delhi for a meeting with the BJP leadership. By Friday afternoon, things had progressed quite a bit with the independents pledging their support to BJP thereby paving way for Khattar-led BJP party to stake claim to form the government again. The Congress won 31 seats, the Jannayak Janata Party won 10 seats in its maiden elections and the Indian National Lok Dal and Haryana Lokhit party one each. Aam Aadmi Party which contested 46 seats was completely decimated. Eight ministers of the state cabinet lost the elections and only 2 out of 10 ministers who were fielded by the BJP will be returning to the state assembly.

The Suno India Show reached out to Ajoy Ashirwad, Deputy Editor of The Wire who has extensive political reporting experience to understand more what the Haryana results mean for the BJP and for the future of Congress party led by Bhupinder Hooda in Haryana.

Hi I am Padma Priya, your host for this episode of The Suno India Show and you are listening to this on the one and only podcast platform for issues that matter Suno India.

What does this result mean for the BJP because until a few hours ago it was literally a situation of hung assembly and now with independents pledging their support to BJP, they are able to stake to form the government again. So what do the results according to you indicate for the BJP?

**Ajoy-** There are few takeaways for both the BJP and the opposition. This was the first Haryana and Maharashtra elections are the first elections after period a landslide victory in the general elections a few months ago. And after that it came on the heels of article 370 being diluted, Jammu and Kashmir, bifurcation of state. In both Haryana and Maharashtra they mounted a strong campaign around these national level issues and they decided to go for the whole hub of hindutva and nationalism. In the process what they did was they hardly kind of spoke about the

performance of the fadnavis government and khattar government. In Haryana for example, all the khatta government claimed that they had cleaned the system and theirs was a zero corruption government which was actually not true because there were so many reports of corruption in Haryana. and the other claim in Haryana they made was that they had digitised the governance model. But these issues hardly resonated with the people who were more concerned about the agrarian crisis or unemployment. Haryana as we know has the highest rate of unemployment, it's almost around touching 30%. And these issues were not talked about so a lot of people told me that these are the first Haryana assembly elections where agriculture and farmer issues were not talked about at all by the ruling party. So I think BJP will get a sense that in assembly elections you cannot only polarizing campaign around hyper nationalism cannot work. They have to address immediate issues of people and livelihood of issues of people. So this is one and for the opposition also there are a few points that I would like to mention. Generally this is also the first time that Congress gave full autonomy to Bhupinder Hooda in Haryana and Sharad Pawar in Maharashtra ran a really spirited campaign, the whole iconic photo where he is speaking addressing a Satara rally in rain completely drenched that kind of resonated with a lot of people. so the spirited fight the opposition taking up these issues immediately then other issues kind of resonate more with people. Although they were fragmented the results show people that people are not happy with the BJP government in the states. And it kind of cements the fact that in assembly elections the local livelihood issues are more important than any large rhetoric of national issues. Both Hinduism and ultranationalism did not work at all.

**Host-** It is interesting that you have talked about the decentralization of power within the Congress, is it something that going forward you think the Congress will finally adopt as a policy because it's clear that giving more power and more autonomy to the local leaders is actually working for them. And follow up question to that is after the assembly elections Lok Sabha elections came out and there was a lot of conversation about the end of the Congress era. So how would you respond to this comment looking at the result in both these States.

**Ajoy-** Well if you talk in the context of how congress stands today I think they better empowered their more state level mass leaders. So what Hudda showed, Congress was just recovering from terrible fighting between Ashok tawae and Huda in Haryana. Congress practically did not fight

the Maharashtra elections because they could not recover from terrible infighting, there were Milind Deora, Sanjay Nirupam was fighting openly on Twitter giving controversial statements just ahead of the assembly elections. So eventually the Congress high command decided that latest m power food and give him full autonomy to fight these elections. WhatHuda showed was despite a weak Central leadership, he is the person, he is a mass leader who could turn around the fate of Congress in elections. Had he gotten more time, if you could imagine a situation where Huda would have given this responsibility immediately after the Lok Sabha elections so I think the results could have been different. Similarly you see Sharad Pawar, take the case of Aditya thakre also, all these state level mass leaders in opposition to anchor their parties well enough to make livelihood issues relevant in the electoral synonym. Despite the fact that the more dominant party which is the BJP dearly spoke about those issues. so what this ensured that a diverse set of issues were being talked about by the people rather than the sole rhetoric of the ultra nationalism which the BJP would have wanted. The results clearly show that there is a strong divide between rural and urban Haryana and Maharashtra, in rural areas the BJP has performed poorly and in the urban areas it still remains popular. And that is the reason they have come back to power. but in rural areas agrarian crisis, unemployment, this poor flood management by the fadnavis government all became issues and that shows like the oppositions victory at the political level not at the electoral level. and specially in Haryana if across the length and breadth of Haryana common people associated with the concept of crony capitalism with the BJP. Everywhere you went they said that BJP bade logon ki Sarkar hai, so somehow this Rahul Gandhi's campaign and opposition campaign during the Lok Sabha election campaign, they kept saying that gine chune kuchh log Hain, there are few people who have benefited in the BJP government and there are not many people so that seems to have penetrated deep into the rural intellect and that has cost the BJP clear.

**Host-** In Haryana do you think despite the BJP now going ahead to form the government do you think this seems like a verdict against BJP, and also could you tell us a bit about the JJP. I don't think a lot of listeners know about this fairly new party and how they actually for a few hours were literally sitting in the position of being kingmakers?

**Ajoy-** The JJP marched out of INLD, so Dushyant Chautala is the grandson of Om Prakash chautala who founded the INLD and Om Prakash chautala is himself son of devilal, one of the

top most leaders of India. So INLD got divided, with JJP merging out of INLD and Dushyant Chautala emerging as the true legate of Devi Lal. And that is why he performed well, INLD the original party their vote share has come down to less than 2% and this was JJP's first election and they still managed to get 15% vote with 10 seats. So that's a fairly good performance for a party which is contesting for the very first time. So cleverly, Dushyant Chautala being a Jat, the Jatts look at him as a future unity leader. I was talking about a fragmented opposition, so what the BJP has done in the last 5 years in Haryana is they have consolidated all other community groups against the Jatts. Jatts have been politically and socially influential, they are 27 or 28 percent of Haryana population, the highest among all communities. So what BJP did by appointing Khattar as the chief minister, who is a non-Jat, they tried to consolidate around 35 communities against one. They did the similar thing in UP also where they consolidated all other smaller groups against Yadav, in Maharashtra also we see that this kind of anti-dominant caste polarization against Marathas. And BJP have tried to kind of cash it in, so Bhupinder Hooda is also a Jat leader, Dushyant Chautala is also a Jat leader, so you see the opposition being dominated by Jats and BJP was relying on other communities. But eventually it turned out that the anti-Jat consolidation that the BJP was relying on did not actually work because of these livelihood issues. Hooda is a Jat leader, Sharad Pawar is a Maratha leader but these leaders particularly did not speak about the Jat community alone, they spoke about generic issues, livelihood issues which every community people kind of related to.

**Host-** Do you think the verdict can be seen as anti-BJP or not?

**Ajoy-** I think in rural areas it is clearly anti-BJP and in urban areas I think there is some sort of resentment but Modi remains very popular. Even in rural areas, Narendra Modi I think remains very popular currently. But what they lack right now is good, prominent and state-level leadership. BJP does not have a single strong leader in the party and everything is around Modi. So you don't have a Shivraj Singh Chauhan or Ram Singh who are in a position to win an election in their state without the help of Modi also or without the help of Amit Saha also. Because they commanded some degree of respect in the state, Khattar and Fadnavis is not a leader of that kind of stature who will be able to win an election only on their charisma. So it's definitely anti-BJP but the fragmented opposition somehow and perception management, machinery by BJP somehow has sent out this kind of message that there is no credible

alternative right now. That there is no other party, I mean other than the BJP, people thought they were in a position to form a government. So generally a poor person in village they don't like to be identified as cross voters, they think that the BJP is going to form a government, though they may like to vote against it, because in the small villages the grassroots democracy functions in a very peculiar way, if those people did not vote for the party which came to power, so they sense it and then they vote accordingly.

**Host-** That's interesting. Could you tell some bit about these independents, whose support BJP has now taken, who are these people and whether they were initially a part of BJP, what's the story behind these independent candidates.

**Ajoy-** So the story has been going around and there are around 9 independent candidates, also these people wanted tickets from either the BJP or the Congress, so they had a stature and they won the elections on their own. Most likely they are now going to join one of these national parties. So there is one person called Gopal Kanda, who became very famous or rather infamous in murder case of 1 air hostess a few years ago if you remember. She had said that this guy harassed her and that has forced her to committing suicide. So these are the kind of people which BJP is getting support from to form the government because they are six short right now. This one person called Ranjit Singh, there's another person called Rakesh Daulatabad, both of these guys were rebelled INLD candidates and won. There is this Somveer Sangwan who is also the BJP Rebel and most likely he'll join BJP now, and then there's Balraj Kundu, Dharmपाल कुन्दर, most of these people were rebels. So they are most likely to support Khattar government at the end and probably they would also get some sort of ministerial positions and that is what they will bargain for.

**Host-** Is this something the Congress should have anticipated that these rebels could potentially win, was there any discussion at any point about a pre poll alliance or a post poll alliance in Congress and JJP or any others?

**Ajoy-** Haryana is a typical case since the 1960s independents have always have played a very crucial role in forming the government. Except last time when Khattar won the majority of the vote, most previous governments they have to rely on independents. And it's back to the same thing again where independents would be playing an important role. So obviously a party cannot

give tickets to every ticket seeker, there will be rebels but what the Congress has done especially in North Haryana, is that they denied tickets to very very powerful local leaders. You can take the example of Ambala where Chaudhary Nirmal Singh and her daughter Charcha Salwara, they were denied tickets and they contested on their own and they finished on very close contest to the BJP candidate who won. And Congress and the Congress candidates in both these constituencies finished a very distant third, one of the Congress candidates in Ambala cantt, Venu Agarwal could not even get 5000 votes. so that shows how the Congress micromanagement and their leaders completely miscalculate the thing because no one knew Venu Aggarwal at all. So you cannot do such things and take such mistakes and expect to register the win. But there were also many BJP rebels who have won. So it's not a problem of one or the other party but the thing is that the BJP had a lot of time to plan the whole campaign and get into a better organisational shape for the elections but Congress hardly had any time. Only 15 days before the state PCC president was changed, Kumari Shailja was made the PCC president and Huda was given the power to steer the campaign, the former President Ashok tavar turned completely rebellious, hidden dharna outside the Congress office in Delhi and then eventually resigned from the Congress's primary membership. So you don't hear these stories in BJP, despite all the distinctions within they somehow able to project a United front.

**Host-** The other party which contested all the 46 seats was the aam aadmi party. I am trying to get a sense of why and what was aam aadmi party trying to do in Haryana. was there any chance for them to break through?

**Ajoy-** It wasn't a player at all. During the anti corruption campaign of 2012 they had good campaign going for them in Haryana and Punjab but after Arvind kejriwal and yogendra Yadav split that campaign got completely washed away. So almost all aam aadmi party's, I am not sure but they have lost their deposits. Yogendra Yadav who was trying to make a mark in assembly elections, they have performed even poorly. some of the candidates getting not more than 500 words, aam aadmi party's candidates not even crossing 2000 votes. So this is how their performance were but Aam Aadmi Party wasn't very serious about Haryana assembly polls. Yogendra Yadav party swaraj India was and yet they receive like quite a disaster.

**Host-** Why contest if they are not serious Ajoy, I mean that's the one thing I want to know why contest if you are not serious?

**Ajoy-** For a political party I think it also, through an election they try and consolidate their case. So even if you have 500 people or 1400 people, one of them would really like to contest because just contesting in election makes you politically prominent in North India. And that is why they do it so that people recognise them and as an Aam Aadmi party candidate they know that they may lose them but they also hope that because people recognise them they may carry on their campaign after the election. So that is what many left parties have been doing in North India, elections despite performing rather poorly in elections they have still been contesting. So it's more kind of motivating thing ok, you are not serious but that ways you can keep your cadres to yourself and prevent them from being completely demoralized I guess.

**Host-** One of the questions that I have is and I know you mentioned it earlier, talking about the exit polls. so hyper nationalism, hindutva did not really worked in Haryana, how much of the economy slowing down you know manufacturing getting hit, farmers getting hit, they played a particular role in these two state elections according to you?

**Ajoy-** In Haryana it played a huge role. Both Haryana and Maharashtra day have been good in manufacturing sector. And manufacturing sector has been the worst hit, because I went to Yamuna Nagar which is in north Haryana and that's the biggest centre for plywood manufacturing. Most of the units are small and medium enterprises, so of 2500 or more units close to 500 have shut over the last one year which means almost 1.5 lakh people lost their jobs and that's a cycle. And even the existing ones which used to run on kind of 3 or 4 plywood presses now are kind of employing only one press, which means they are employing less people. So what happens in the process is the people who plant these, the timber farmers have also been hit as a result. Show the whole economy has come crashing down in yamunanagar and same is the case with Ambala, a city which is known for scientific instruments and manufacturing, that has also been hit. So basically the poor consumer sentiment, the fall in real estate sector everything has had a cascading effect on people's life. thevar commission agents who used to completely rely on payment received for being the link between the farmer and factories. They showed me bills which were pending for the last two years, some amounting to

15 lacs, some 20 lacs and these are the people who run the economy without much government support. Some policies that the Modi government made, they criticized it because demonetisation hit them very hard, they were not recovered from that and now they are dealing with the GST crisis, plywood had 28% GST on it and it was really turning out to be a bad thing for them despite the fact that they wanted to pass that tax to the consumer but they have to file a lot of returns and all those kinds of technical problems. So after a lot of pressure on the BJP government got the GST rate cut to 18%, but they haven't recovered from the slow down after demonetisation at all. And the decline in this real estate sector has really affected them, same is the case with automobile sector in Gurgaon, more than Maruti there was a lot of ancillary units that came up around Gurgaon to supply goods to the Maruti unit. And because Maruti has stopped reducing as many units now of car so this ancillary units have been directly affected, and in these ancillary units local people work and that is the mainstay of the economy. Everyone spoke about, I was there and karva chauth, it's the Diwali bazaar and this is the busiest time for the shopkeepers and all the markets had a gloomy look despite the lights. the whole lit up street there were hardly any customers. I spoke to many of these customers and they said that their salaries have been reduced by almost half now and they don't know how they would be able to sell the goods they have already procured. Some of them were intelligent enough they had credited it and they said that they just did not procure so much which they were not confident of selling. So this is what had happened and all these things, BJP did not even assure people, give them small assurance that all these things will be solved. They just did not address these issues at all, they thought that running a campaign on 370, national security, army, these things will help them win and this is clearly not the case.

**Host-** What's the lack of jobs and unemployment which seems to be on India's sort of trend right now, how big an issue was in Haryana and this in any way also impact say the first time voters who might have voted this time around?

**Ajoy-** I think in Haryana only a month ago khattar government kind of advertised for 500 clerical positions for which 15 lakh people applied. Some of them were PhD scholars also, and that was the state of affairs. Many people complain about unemployment that they don't have jobs, but I thought that joblessness alone wasn't an issue. It was an overall cumulative idea among common people of Haryana that the Khattar government did not work on the economic front at

all, they did not do anything. Because Haryana is primary and agrarian society, so you will find joint family is where one person is in the service sector, the other person in the same family is also a farmer. One person in the family can't find a job, the other person who is a farmer can't find remuneration. This Modi's announcement and Khatter's announcement that they have double farmers income actually backfired in Haryana and Maharashtra. Everywhere the input costs have really increased for farmers and they weren't getting commissioned. So in mandis where I went, so this is the basmati season in Haryana, so they have already harvested so you will find basmati rice in Haryana Mandis in quite some amount. So minimum support price for this is 1835, which was around 1600 last year so Modi have increased it but everywhere they were not getting the full 1835. For the government to procure basmati at that rate, the basmati rice cannot have moisture level above 17%. And every time the crop get rejected because even if the moisture content is 18%, so they have been getting only 1600 same amount, while the input cost in agriculture have almost doubled. So that has backfired and that has caused great anger among the farmer.

**Host-** You have been saying all through the local issues have been at the top of everyone's mind and clearly something that the BJP could not capitalise as well.

**Ajoy-** What I am saying is like the BJP, generally there is the dominance of Identity politics in today's age that has given a chance to BJP to know the whole hog on the cultural, The Hindu front, the whole hyper nationalism these kind of issues. So one can say that it practices that kind of Hindu cultural politics foregrounds it and expect people to vote on those issues. But what we saw in the assembly polls was like a complete defeat of that brand of politics despite the fact that the BJP has won. So people valued bread and butter issues more than issues of nationalism. So what we can say is that occupational identities of people became more important for them than their cultural identities. The caste politics also so did not consider much and this religious politics also did not work much. So what I was saying like the general message in both these elections, is that what BJP has been trying to do is to completely centre its politics around the cult of Modi, people's direct representative is an MLA and not in MP, so this kind of Modi can work in general elections but this doesn't work in assembly elections because MLA is the one you will reach out to for small issues like the drain is not working, the road is not working, so these issues need to be addressed. I think opposition did it well but they

were not organised enough to win these elections. In a different time in each these were the oppositions elections to win and be comprehensive.

**Host-** How much this the Rahul Gandhi resigning and the internal crisis within the Congress that has been going around since the Lok Sabha election result.

**Ajoy-** That has been spread into the notion that the opposition has been not strong enough. but their message has penetrated, Rahul Gandhi has been speaking about crony capitalism in BJP's rule for a long time now. And that resonated in people's promise in Haryana at least, I did not go to Maharashtra but overall I have been following and people have been telling that generally people think that BJP is a super rich party and doesn't concern itself with the basic issues of the working class.

**Host-** Do you think this is an end of the era for, I wouldn't say the end of an era because the era never started with Rahul Gandhi in that sense, but with Rahul Gandhi stepping away as the President, but still going and campaigning and you know. I mean I just want to get like where does Rahul Gandhi fit into all of these results that have now come out for the Congress. Did he have any role in that sense or this is like the end of the era for the Gandhi family or the Congress?

**Ajoy-** I seriously don't think, I have been writing against dynastic politics for a long time but generally Congress is a party which has functioned well only under the Gandhi's and that has been the case right now. Rahul Gandhi has left and there's already a fight between the senior leaders and the young leaders, the young leaders like Jyotiraditya Sindhiya, Milind deora have been speaking against the official party line against the article 370 also, so finally if you go to the ground and see that people do not hate Gandhi's, people think that Congress is a completely unorganised party maybe a corrupt party but it functions well under Gandhi's so they are quite accepting of the Gandhi's. We in the media, the BJP, may talk about it, but generally there is a likeability factor that works for the Gandhis also. And if you kind of pitch dynasty politics against BJPs brand of Hindutva and hyper nationalism or ultranationalism, whatever you call, that kind of polarising politics on the basis of religion, I think dynasty politics is much better, not much better but dynasty politics is much more acceptable than BJPs brand of polarising politics that too on the basis of religion.

**Host-** Considering anyway the dynasty politics is party agnostic nowadays any day so we can't help it, there is a general political class has generally been corrupt in India, so there is a huge trust deficit between political class and Indian people and yet every five year we elect one or the other party to power. So you make the choice, you make the choice between the devil and the deep sea. And people of India are forced to make that choice and they are quite okay with it. They don't think of it as a choice between the devil and the deep sea like the way we think probably.

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