

J&K Elections - 2002: An Overview

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J&K Assembly elections 2002 had a special significance not only because the world was closely watching the proceedings and keen to know the results, but also because, it was an election held under extraordinary circumstances under the threats issued by militants not to participate in the elections. The spate of killings before, and during elections left eight hundred people dead during the period. As usual, the boycott call by the secessionists was there, but there were two factors that made it different from 1996. Firstly, the militants were not as active and as strong in 1996 as they were this time and also they were committed to sabotaging the elections. Secondly, the Indian government was determined to make the elections free and fair, with a high degree of transparency. It was regarded necessary to establish the reliability of the democratic institutions of the country, and also to prove the credibility of the Indian stance on Kashmir. It goes without saying that the Indian establishment (especially, the Election Commission) received wide acclaim for its performance. A substantial section of the people participated in the elections and the poll percentage was reasonably good at 43%. This was so in spite of the boycott call by the secessionists and militant's threat.

The local media in Kashmir, during the run up to the elections covered the electoral process very closely and commentators reflecting on the mood of the people held that for the people of the state, elections were very significant, and most of them saw in it an opportunity for restoring peace to Kashmir. It must be admitted that people largely participated without fear and it was also clearly visible that in some pockets of the valley the sway of threat by militants kept the rate of participation at an all time minimum. But the general trend was quite encouraging and the elections have demonstrated the people's yearning for peace.

For the last 12 years, Kashmir has been facing turbulence, unforeseen sufferings, deaths, massacres and separations. The elections for most of the people from Kashmir meant a way out of the state of turmoil they were in.

Elections indeed gave them a respite and a chance to convey the message— the message of peace to the world. By participating in the elections, under the threat of the gun, and the confusing and contradictory statements of the politicians, they have voted in a pattern that speaks volumes about their approach, their thinking and their aspirations. By defying the gun and not being lured by 'catchy' slogans, the people have shown that they not only possess fortitude, but have sagacity and sense of discrimination, to sift the

good from the evil. Some significant inferences can be drawn from the analysis of the election results.

The Valley

In the valley, the percentage of votes polled was 29% [8,35,501 votes were polled out of an electorate of 28,84,015]. There was a definite urban-rural divide in the pattern of polling. The urban areas observed almost minimal voting. The urban intelligentsia, roughly one fifth of the population of the valley remained away from the electoral scene. Polling was substantially good in rural areas, who seemed to be more concerned about peace and day to day problems. They wanted good governance, and therefore, rejected even some veterans in politics and paved the way for the entry of new faces. *Kashmir Times* captures the popular mood well: "The verdict, at least in the Valley, which should be of greater concern for all at this juncture, where people braved bullets from both sides to participate in polling, with a renewed optimism, was also for a peaceful solution of Kashmir problem. Unequivocally, the election can in no measure be construed as victory of India over Pakistan or of India over the alienation of the people." (18 October 2002, Jammu).

They wanted a change because the previous government had dis-appointed them by their non-performance as well as bad performance. The government had failed in redressing their grievances or alleviating their sufferings. Thus, in the valley, the ruling party-National Conference won in only 18 seats, including one from Kargil, 16 seats were won by People's Democratic Party (PDP— Mufti Sayeed's party), Congress secured 5, CPM claimed 2 and the rest went to independents. Obviously, the PDP and the Congress reaped the maximum benefit out of the negative vote due to anti-incumbency factor, against NC.

The PDP achieved this success, because it touched the sensitive chords of the people. It promised to do things, which the people long for. The party talked of not using POTA, disbanding of SOG, releasing detainees and talking to militants. It is a different issue how much they can achieve, and whether it is within their competence. Moreover, much of the manifesto has been watered down, at the time of forming the common minimum programme of PDP-Congress coalition government. Instead of disbanding SOG, it says about its merger in police, and rules out talking to foreign militants. It would be in place to report the responses of the people to the threat of elections as articulated by the local media.

Thus daily *Uqab*, 12 October 2002, Srinagar wrote "The militants and Pakistan adopted the same attitude towards the people of Kashmir, as if, they were dumb, driven cattle, and directions rather orders came from Islamabad, which Kashmiris were supposed to obey. There was no other alternative but to give a shaking to Pakistan, so that it realizes that people of Kashmir cannot be taken for granted, such that anybody from Rawalpindi or Islamabad can rule over them. A living nation cannot tolerate a situation

where an Afghan or a Pakistani comes with a gun and orders boycott of elections. The people have boycotted elections, only when they felt like it, even when there was no fear of the gun. Today, when the gun surrounded them, they came out and defied it.”

The daily *Nida-i-Mashriq*, 20 October 2002, Srinagar commented:

“P.D.P. did not get votes only because people were filled with hatred and dislike of National Conference, but also because it raised issues that touched the hearts of the people. The party assured the people that it would address the basic problem (Kashmir) at the political level. In spite of the presence of militants and the Hurriyat Conglomerate, the people felt the need for a forum or alternative that could emerge at the administrative level, to address... the basic problem and help people in getting over their difficulties.”

Jammu Division

In Jammu division, the percentage of polling was 56.7% [17,35,442 votes were polled out of an electorate of 30,54,980]. The senior party of the coalition Congress secured 15 seats in Jammu, Panthers’ Party– 4, National Conference-10, BSP-1, BJP-1, Independents and others-6. Congress received real success in Jammu division. It was not a question of manifesto or ideology, but a purely an anti-incumbency vote. It was a vote not only against National Conference (because it still got 10 seats), but in fact, also against BJP, the party leading the National Democratic Alliance at the centre in New Delhi. In Jammu BJP failed miserably because in spite of being in power at the Centre, the party could not solve the problems of the people of Jammu as well as the state as a whole. Above all, it was a vote that categorically rejected the politics of trifurcation advocated by sister organizations of BJP like RSS. BJP has in fact played a policy of double speak over the issue— rejecting ‘trifurcation’ of the state at the higher level (i.e. Central level), and allying with the Jammu Morcha (that pleads for a separate state for Jammu) at the state level. By all means, the people of Jammu rejected communalism and chauvinistic regionalism. It is worthwhile to record some media responses in this regard.

Greater Kashmir, 20 October 2002, Srinagar, wrote that

“Separatism as understood in the Valley has always been a broad and idealist concept, which includes in its sweep even Jammu and Ladakh. Though the complexity of the view is trickling down, trifurcation is still a subject alien to the Valley’s popular political outlook.”

According to daily *Uqab* – 17 October 2002, Srinagar:

“The people of Jammu rejected communalist politics and negated the move to divide the state. It is a positive change in the people’s thinking. They gave a jolt to parties like BJP, Shiv Sena, RSS etc. Jammu has been the main centre of the activities of these

parties. Today, when communal feelings are being fanned in the country, Jammu people have seen a new light and voted against communalism. For them, there was no alternative but Congress.”

The *Daily Excelsior*, 16 October 2002, Jammu, wrote that

“The recent vote for peace and prosperity is also for fostering greater bonds between the regions and peoples, with an equitable treatment, an attitude of equipoise, and removal of disabilities, inequalities and prejudices.”

NC is down not out

The story of the erstwhile ruling party, NC, is simple, though sad. The National Conference lost power, but in no case, can it be said that it is out. It is the single largest party, with 28 seats, 17 in the valley 10 in Jammu, 1 in Kargil. The percentage of votes polled by the party is still the highest and almost equal to the combined votes of PDP and Congress. It still remains the only party that has a network throughout the state. The party would draw its own conclusions from the defeat at the hustings.

It would be appropriate to quote some more observations from the local media regarding the PDP-Congress alliance, which has formed the government in Jammu and Kashmir.

The daily *The Mirror of Kashmir*, 13 October 2002, Srinagar, reflected as:

“It is high time for PDP and Congress to interpret the outcome of the polls and come up to the expectations of the masses who have suffered the most all these years. They cannot help on the ultimate resolution of Kashmir issue, as it has much wider dimensions, but must fulfill the promises made in their manifestos.”

According to *Nida-i-Mashriq*, 16 October 2002, Srinagar:

“Congress has to accept the fact that it got no representative from three districts of Kupwara, Budgam and Pulwama. PDP has to accept that it did not get a single seat from the six districts of Jammu. As such, both parties have got a fragmented verdict and neither party can claim to be the sole representative of the people. In view of this fractured mandate, it becomes imperative upon both parties to co-operate and understand each other’s point of view and make adjustments.”

An in-depth analysis helps in making certain inferences. Firstly, the verdict has been for peace. In spite of the fear of the gun, and the explicit warning of the militants, the people of the Valley, as well as from Rajouri, Poonch and Doda, districts of Jammu which are infested by militancy, came out to vote. Surely, the people wanted a change for the better, so that they could live in peace. Secondly, ideology or ideologies were not

involved in this election. No 'catchy slogans' or 'rosy promises' could lure the voters. Instead of parties, they voted for persons, preferring new faces. It may be said that more than 50 % of the members of the legislature are new entrants. Thirdly, the people voted for 'integrity' and unity of the state. No kind of chauvinism or regionalism or communalism could wean away the voters. Trifurcation plan was outrightly rejected. Fourthly, by defying the gun and least caring for the dictates from across the border, the people have demonstrated that they cannot be ordered about and are capable of taking their own decisions. By defeating N.C. they have signalled that the people judge their representatives by performance, and not by any other standards. That was the lesson for National Conference. In spite of its historic role, the party was shown the door.

The urdu weekly *Chattan* (21-27 October 2002), Srinagar writes: "The fact is that the people of Kashmir want to settle their issues within Kashmir, instead of New Delhi. Not only in the Valley, but in whole of the State, the people have rejected BJP-N.C. combine and have voted for securing the local interests. It is very much probable that the verdict is not a short-lived bubble, but will assume a tangible shape in future. The weightage that the Centre has given to the people's opinion has helped in creating a strain of positive thinking in the people. It is for the first time that National Conference has been shifted from the Centre-stage."