

Blood feud in yellow & blue



S V Srinivas

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In Andhra, polls for assembly matter more than for LS. Jagan vs Naidu is a vicious enmity but both are friends with BJP. And parivar is everything on both sides.

It's a state like no other. Campaigns for Andhra's simultaneous elections on May 13 are focused squarely on its assembly contests. In Parliament, both regional parties TDP and YSRCP have more or less aligned with BJP. If TDP's Chandrababu Naidu has been in-out, and in again, with NDA, CM Jagan Reddy's YSRCP has been voting with NDA in Parliament.

Andhra NDA – a triumvirate of TDP, film star Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party (JSP) and BJP – stands to challenge incumbent YSRCP. Congress, CPI and CPM are also in the fray. Leading Congress is YS Sharmila, Jagan's sister who is contesting from Kadapa, YSRCP's flagship LS constituency. Neither Modi nor any national issues, whether Ram Mandir, abrogation of Article 370 or CAA figure prominently in the campaign.

CM the campaign centre | BJP's a minor player, contesting only 6 of Andhra's 25 Lok Sabha seats, and 10 of its 175-seat assembly. That too reflects the clout of the central leadership rather than the low levels of local support. TDP's contesting on 17 LS seats and 144 in assembly. Much of the drama revolves around Jagan, India's wealthiest CM, and his party. In 2019, YSRCP won 22 LS seats, and 151 in the assembly.

Jagan's return promises to weaken TDP, which won 3 LS and 23 assembly seats in 2019, and JSP. These two, on their return, promise to send Jagan, who has 26 criminal cases against him, to jail. INDIA allies, which didn't win any seats in 2019, hope for a return to the assembly.

Uneasy an alliance | The widely shared perception that Jagan enjoys a warm relationship with Modi and Shah has been reinforced by PM not making any direct attacks on the 51-year-old. A YSRCP victory may give NDA an ally in Parliament once again.

NDA allies have little in common. It's an open secret most TDP and JSP leaders distrust BJP. In the past, both have criticised it for denying post-bifurcation Andhra 'Special Category' status and central govt funding. This year, anti-Modi memes and cartoons are circulating among TDP, not just YSRCP, supporters. However, both TDP and JSP are suggesting an alliance with BJP is necessary for the state's development.

Another reason for the uneasiness may be that while at the national level BJP opposes a Muslim quota, Naidu reassured Andhra's Muslims the 4% quota for the community will remain. TDP also promised the community – about 9.5% of state population (Census 2011) – a pension, a minority finance commission for loans, and land for eidgahs and graveyards.

Jagan's Indira-NTR-Modi move | At the centre of campaigns are welfare (samkshemam) championed by YSRCP, and development (abhivruddhi), by NDA. Jagan has a good track record of implementing welfare schemes, known as the 'nine gems' (navaratnalu), which include the popular direct cash transfers to all sections of people, from widows to the elderly to mothers of girls.

Some 2.5 lakh paid ward and village volunteers played a critical role in the delivery of cash benefits. The volunteer system Jagan introduced is an advanced version of Indira Gandhi, NTR and Modi's models of direct appeal to the electorate, meant to render lower-level party leadership redundant. Jagan promises welfare and volunteers deliver it.

What lies in manifestos | Over the past five years, TDP had been arguing that these schemes were wasteful and reached only YSRCP supporters. The party also claimed, not without justification, that the volunteers were in fact YSRCP cadres, paid for party work with public funds.

Despite all this, the TDP-JSP joint manifesto promises to increase, not scrap, pensions and other benefits. It also promises to increase the volunteer honorarium from ₹5,000 to ₹10,000 per month. The TDP-JSP manifesto, not endorsed by BJP, aims at an increase of the ever-popular welfare schemes.

It also promises to develop Amaravati as capital city, a move it expects will attract investments and industries, resulting in jobs. Another significant promise is the completion of the decades-old Polavaram irrigation project, and just compensation to those displaced. Still, no party is paying attention to the state's industrial development, which continues to lag behind Telangana.

Colour & code | Mainstream Telugu media, referred to derisively as 'yellow media' (TDP's colour) and 'blue media' (YSRCP's colour) by the parties' opponents, is openly partisan.

Neither yellow nor blue has a monopoly over old or new media, but both parties launched the 2024 campaign with a number of pro-YSRCP and pro-TDP films attacking heads of rival parties.

Caste & clout | This election is not only about Jagan, his rivals, some new players and renewed alliances. It's also an old story of dominance of state politics by powerful agrarian castes: Reddys, Kammas and Kapus.

NTR, YSR and 'Megastar' Chiranjeevi who founded his Praja Rajyam Party in 2008, later merging it with Congress, belong, respectively, to the Kamma, Reddy and Kapu castes. Andhra also remains a textbook case of political nepotism and parivaarvad.

Ex-Congress CM of undivided Andhra, late YSR Reddy's children head YSRCP and Congress, while NTR's parivaar heads TDP (Naidu is his son-in-law) and BJP (state president Daggubati Purandeswari is NTR's daughter). Pawan Kalyan is Chiranjeevi's brother. Political varasatvam (inheritance, legacy) is flouted openly in the state, where family ties remain the biggest political capital.

The writer teaches at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Views are personal.

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