

Himachal Pradesh Assembly Elections 2017 and Shifting of Electoral Power Center

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Abstract

State assembly elections especially after 2014 got distinct importance because of the fact that how Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has emphasized to win these elections? The national wave which emerged against the Congress Party especially after 2014 and anti-incumbency factor against Congress in Himachal Pradesh has helped BJP in winning this state in December 2017. The outcomes of these assembly elections in Himachal Pradesh have brought some dramatic changes in the state politics. This paper is an attempt to know that what were the responsible factors which has brought changes in the top leadership (from Prem Kumar Dhumal to Jai Ram Thakur) and electoral power centre (from Hamirpur to Mandi) of BJP? This research paper also focuses on the changes which emerged in party politics (in Congress and BJP) after the elections.

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Introduction

Bhartiya Janata Party has expanded its electoral support base after 2014 Lok-Sabha elections by winning most of the states' assembly elections successively. In Himachal Pradesh assembly elections of 2017, the BJP got the same results. No doubt that Himachal election was less highlighted in media but had equally important to both the national parties- INC and BJP. Less coverage of the elections in Himachal by the

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national media was mainly due to its meager seat share in national parliament (i.e. four seats). Another important reason was the confidence of BJP because the electoral history of Himachal Pradesh has established trends in which anti-incumbency factor always played very important role in every assembly elections and no incumbent government repeated its tenure for consecutive term. This time also there was the combination of national wave against the Congress Party and anti-incumbency against Congress in the state played the role to oust the Congress (*The Economic Times*, December 19:2017). These all factors have played crucial role for fewer rallies by national leaders in Himachal Pradesh but more focus has been given to the simultaneous elections going to held in Gujrat where many new factors were playing the role and became a dominating challenge for BJP. But results came in favour of BJP and it won both of the states. In Himachal Pradesh it got 44 out of 68 seats but a high voltage drama started mainly after the elections result when BJP pulled off a stunning victory and trounced the incumbent Congress government. Surprisingly, BJP's Chief ministerial candidate lost his seat (*Business Today*, December 18:2017) which gave way to whole new political formations including new chief ministerial candidate from BJP and how this outcome of the elections has also changed the power center from Hamirpur district to Mandi district is the focus of this paper.

Trends in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Elections since 1971

Himachal Pradesh has historically remained two national parties dominant state- Congress and BJP. The other political parties, whether they are national or regional, such as Smajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, CPI, CPI(M) and Trinmool Congress etc. have remained less influential in state electoral politics. Some regional parties emerged just for a short period of time and then lost their influence and existence for the next elections; for example Himachal Vikas Congress (HVC) party formed by a former Congress leader Sukh Ram in 1998. The HVC got 5 seats in the elections of 1998 and Congress and BJP both got 31-31 seats respectively. HVC played an important role in formation of government by giving its support to BJP. This party lived no long and in 2004 party merged itself in Congress (*The Hindu*, April 13:2004). Another example was in 2012 when Maheshwer Singh (a BJP leader) formed a regional party named Himachal Lokhit Party (HLP) in 2012 and contested the state assembly elections of 2012 and secured only one seat but in 2016 it merged with the BJP and in 2017 assembly elections of Himachal Pradesh in 2017, Maheshwer Singh fought elections from BJP (*The Indian Express*, August 14:2017). There were some other regional parties too which emerged and later on disappeared. They were Lok Janshakti Party (2003), Loktantrik Morcha of Himachal Pradesh (2003), Lok Dal (1985) and Lok Raj Party of Himachal Pradesh (1985). The dominance and influence of CPI (M) was also remained limited only to some urban pockets and won only one seat for four times in the electoral history of Himachal Pradesh till 2017.¹ And even in 2017 state assembly elections of Himachal Pradesh, CPI(M) won one seat after 24 year (*The Hindu*, December 18:2017). Therefore, except HVC, there were no other regional political party in Himachal Pradesh which influenced or changed the political competition and power equation in its favour or in the favour of any national political party. The Table No. 1 is indicative of the fact that how Himachal Pradesh remained only 'Two Party Competitive State' and the role of other national and regional parties remained less influencing in forming the governments. Only once in 1998, HVC played role in forming the government and it was also for once.

¹ In 1972, 1990, 1993 and 2017 assembly elections, CPI(M) got one seat every time.

Table No. 1: Assembly Election-wise performance of Political Parities (INC, BJS, JNP, and BJP) since 1972 to 2017 in Himachal Pradesh

Election Years	Seats won by Congress (seats contested for)	Seats won by BJP (seats contested for)	Others (Independent Candidates and Political Parties)	Winning Party
1972	53 (68)	5(31)*	10	INC
1977	9 (56)	53 (68)*	6	Janata Party
1982	31(67)	29(67)	8	INC
1985	58 (68)	7 (57)	3	INC
1990	9 (66)	46 (51)	13	BJP
1993	52 (67)	8 (68)	8	INC
1998	31 (68)	31 (68)	6	BJP & HVC Alliance
2003	43 (68)	16 (68)	9	INC
2007	23 (67)	41 (68)	4	BJP
2012	36 (68)	26 (68)	6	INC
2017	21(68)	44(68)	3	BJP

Source: Data accessed and compiled by the authors from Statistical Report on General Elections (1972 to 2017), to the Legislative Assembly of Himachal Pradesh.

Note: * in 1972 assembly elections, it was Bhartiya Jan Sangh and in 1977 it was Janata Party instead of BJP.

The main trend which continued in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Elections since its statehood status in 1971 is that no one political party became able to repeat its government for the consecutive term. Anti-incumbency supposed to be the reason for this trend. In fact, this is needed to be studied that is it really the anti-incumbency factor or something else which works against the incumbent government in every assembly election. Beside anti-incumbency, another factor, which is supported by many political commentators, is an age old thesis or a tag of upper-lower division (Sharma, 1999: 2465-2471). Upper regions contained Shimla, Kinnour, Lahul-Spiti, Sirmour, Kullu and Solan districts supposed to be Congress influenced areas whereas the Lower regions consists Hamirpur, Kangra, Mandi, Bilaspur and Una districts supposed to be the BJP dominated. Chamba district is always remained in question that weather it should be considered in Lower Regions or Upper Regions but now it is considered in Lower regions more by seeing its political preferences. But this thesis is not empirically tested that now how much it affects the politics of Himachal Pradesh during the assembly elections but this thesis was very significant during 1980s and 1990s. With all these trends the influence of national factors or governments always remained important factor in influencing the elections of the state.

Issues and Competition in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Elections of 2017

In the backdrop of above trends, and the announcement of elections it was claimed by the political commentators that the two-party competition (INC and BJP) is going to be very tough this time in the state because Congress Party decided to test its elections fortunes on the leadership of Shri Virbhadra Singh who has his own aura and had served six times as chief minister in Himachal Pradesh. The programmes and policies he adopted during his tenure especially during the last one year of his office such as the execution of unemployment allowances, reduction of the period of regularization of contractual employee from five years to three years (*The Tribune*, April 18:2017); and job creations in various fields (*The Pioneer*, May 2:2016) also gave a chance to take the bull by the horns this time. Beside this, ten ministers and eight chief

parliamentary secretaries and deputy speaker Jagat Singh Negi had also thrown their hat in the ring. The commendable works done by the Congress Party's government in last five years popularized the personality of Virbhadra Singh (former Chief Minister) more than earlier. A few National leaders came for the election campaign but Virbhadra Singh took the center stage.

From the BJP side, the 'Modi factor', emerged after 2014 Lok Sabha elections all over India and continuously played an important role as a party winning factor in most of the states' assembly elections from 2014 to 2017 such as in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa and Assam etc. Therefore, BJP laid more focus on this strategy to win most of the assembly elections in Indian states after 2014 and in most of the Indian states the BJP formulated its government either individually or with alliance partners except Punjab. Hence, a similar conception was made by the BJP in context of Himachal elections which held in Nov 2017. From the beginning of election campaign to the end of it, BJP tried its best to take the benefit of so called Modi Wave but unfortunately in Himachal Pradesh, Modi wave did not work out as it worked in other states' assembly elections. Reason for this was the popularity of work and leadership of Virbhadra Singh.

BJP started its election campaign without declaration of CM candidate because there were many predictions of the names of Prem Kumar Dhumal, J.P. Nadda and Ajay Jamwal for this candidature but these were all in secret discussions in party and BJP cadre. But finally, the fear of losing the elections and diplomacy of Dhumal's Block forced the BJP to announce the name of Prem Kumar Dhumal as their leader for Chief Ministership. Beside this, about 6-7 national cabinet ministers and some chief ministers from other states also campaigned in favour of BJP's candidates in the state which accelerated BJP's election campaign in winning direction. Ultimately, the BJP ousted Congress and got a huge victory in this hill state by winning 44 seats out of 68. This overwhelming support gained by the BJP was from the districts like Mandi (9 out of 10 seats), Kangra (11 out of 15 seats) and Chamba (4 out of 5 seats). But the irony was that Prem Kumar Dhumal, the CM candidate, lost his own seat from Sujampur constituency which changed the fate and static political equations of the state. Some other senior leaders of the Dhumal's block also lost their seats such as Gulab Singh Thakur from Jogindernager constituency and Satpal Singh Satti from Una constituency. This time Dhumal's defeat and the dramatic change gave way to a new Chief Minister ship and senior leader Jai Ram Thakur from Siraj constituency of Mandi district became the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh who was also supposed to be close to J.P Nadda as well as Shri Shanta Kumar (a senior BJP leader).²

Shift in Electoral Power Center of Bhartiya Janata Party and Changes in Party Politics of Himachal Pradesh

The outcomes of 2017 assembly elections have shifted the political centre from Hamirpur to Mandi district which was in fact unpredictable. The people of the state had always an opinion that if BJP will win, than the Chief Minister would be from Hamirpur district and if Congress will get the power then Chief Minister would be from Shimla district (this time from Solan district because CM Candidate of Congress Shri Virbhadra Singh contested his election from Arki constituency of Solan district (in all previous elections Virbhadra Singh contested from the one of the constituencies of Shimla district only). This popular belief had taken long time to be a trend in Himachal politics. If the electoral history of BJP has to be analyzed than it

² From 1998 to 2012, within BJP there were two blocks- Dhumal Block and Shanta Block.

became clear that for BJP only two districts remain deciding for Chief Ministership and they were Kangra and Hamirpur. After 1977 to the entry of Prem Kumar Dhumal in state electoral politics the BJP bloc had been dominated and regulated from Kangra district under the leadership of Shanta Kumar. After Prem Kumar Dhumal's leadership this has been shifted to Hamirpur because he belonged from this district as Shanta Kumar was from Kangra. In first phase of BJP's electoral journey under Shanta Kumar the center of BJP's political activities was Kangra after which the electoral political center of BJP shifted to Hamirpur under Prem Kumar Dhumal.

The elections of 2017 has changed this age old hypothesis into something new and also marked a full stop of this saying that having large number of seats after Kangra district Mandi has never established itself as the dominating power center which can gave CM from Mandi also. The formation of Jai Ram Thakur's (the new CM) cabinet gave a clear indication of power shifting, and it also hinted the futuristic politics and the BJP's new strategy. Even Harish K Thakur has elaborated the emergence of this new leadership as an end of dominance of two clan i.e. Dhumal and Virbhadra (Thakur 2018). The BJP had chosen its six cabinet ministers (out of eleven) from only two districts- from Mandi (2) and from Kangra (4). And Chief Minister is also from Mandi district. It was only due to the maximum seats the BJP won from these two districts i.e. 20 seats (out of 25). It was BJP's new strategy to make these two districts as new political centers of their influence. This was also because of one more reason and that was the 2019's Lok-Sabha elections. These two districts influenced the Three Parliamentary Constituency's results (out of four)³ in Himachal Pradesh. Sirmour and Chamba districts have also given majoritarian win for the BJP but they have not given important portfolios except Speaker from Sirmour and Deputy Speaker from Chamba district.⁴ Moreover, BJP got three seats in Bilaspur district (out of four) but could not kept place in cabinet, three seats in Kullu district (out of four) got one minister, three seats in Una district (out of five) got one minister, two seats from Solan district (out of five) got one minister, three seats from Shimla district (out of eight) got one minister and two seats from Hamirpur district (out of five) got no place in Jai Ram's cabinet. Surprisingly, the Hamirpur district which was once known as BJP's stronghold and was a power centre avoided this time by the BJP. Same is the case with Bilaspur district. The last cabinet minister goes to Lahul&Sapiti district which is a tribal district having only one assembly seat and this time BJP got it. The detail regarding the district-wise seats won and vote share of Congress, BJP and others have been shown in the Table No. 2.

³ The three parliamentary constituencies which influenced by Mandi and Kangra districts are Mandi, Kangra and Hamirpur parliamentary constituencies.

⁴ Senior BJP leader from Sirmour district, Rajeev Bindal was given the portfolio of speaker and Hans Raj from Chamba district was given the portfolio of Deputy Speaker of thirteenth assembly of Himachal Pradesh.

Table No. 2: District-wise Election Result of Winning Seats and Vote Share (%age) of INC, BJP and Others in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Election, 2017.

Sr No	Name of District	Seats won by Congress	Seats won by BJP	Seats Won By Others	District-wise vote share of Congress Party (%age)	District-wise vote share of BJP (%age)	District-wise Vote Share of Others (%age)	District-wise Total seats
1	Bilaspur	1	3	0	44.36	53.50	2.14	4
2	Chamba	1	4	0	27.29	50.96	21.76	5
3	Hamirpur	3	2	0	44.97	49.10	5.93	5
4	Kangra	3	11	1	39.03	34.40	26.57	15
5	Kullu	1	3	0	45.54	50.30	4.16	4
6	Kinnour	1	0	0	47.89	47.60	4.51	1
7	Lahul&Sapiti	0	1	0	36.93	45.63	17.44	1
8	Mandi	0	9	1	34.36	53.26	12.38	10
9	Shimla	4	3	1	41.29	42.59	16.12	8
10	Sirmour	2	3	0	44.1	48.38	7.52	5
11	Solan	3	2	0	46.36	45.60	8.04	5
12	Una	2	3	0	46.11	50.73	3.16	5
Total		21	44	3	41.04	45.23	13.73	68

Source: Election Commission of India- State Election, 2017 to the Legislative Assembly of Himachal Pradesh, and Compiled by the Authors.

Hence, this time Chief Minister, Jai Ram Thakur constituted the cabinet of his own choice as well as the candidates who were preferred by the national body of the BJP which also believed in his farsightedness and that was that how BJP can make a permanent stronghold in the state especially in the districts having larger number of assembly seats (Kangra and Mandi) and which also influenced three parliamentary constituencies.

On the other hand, for Congress Party, this assembly election was not proved good. Congress Party was defeated miserably and got only 21 seats whereas in 2012 assembly elections it got 36 seats. Anti-incumbency was the main factor for the defeat. Law and order especially the Gudiya rape case in Kotkhai region in Shimla district (*The Economic Times*, November 5:2017) and Forest guard, Hoshiyar Singh murder case in Karsog region of Mandi district were also burning issues during the elections which were hijacked by the opposition parties and it reduced the people's faith on Congress party (*The Indian Express*, September 14:2017). The issue of corruption charges on Virbhadra Singh was also targeted by the BJP. Beside these reasons, the BJP's organized election campaign and Congress's factionalism also reduced the congress's seats in the state. National issues such as GST and demonetization have not influenced much of the voters in the state. Above all, in this election, five cabinet ministers of incumbent Congress government lost their seats. They were- Kaul Singh Thakur from Drung constituency of Mandi district, G.S. Bali from Nagrota Bangwa constituency of Kangra district, Thakur Singh Bharmouri from Bharmour constituency of Chamba district, Sudhir Sharma from Dharmshala constituency of Kangra district and Prakash Chaudhory from Balh constituency of Mandi district. Even, Kaul Singh Thakur and G.S. Bali had once claimed for the chief ministership in the Congress party. In that context, no doubt, the election results were not good for Congress Party but good for Virbhagra Singh. His opponents within the party were defeated this time and his son Vikramaditya won his debut election from Shimla Gramin constituency of Shimla district. It supposed that this was Virbhadra Singh's last political inning as a member of legislative assembly but to launch his son at

the right time was also his diplomatic victory. Over and above, the clash of clans is not completely over as predicted by Harish K. Thakur (Thakur, 2018) because Vikramaditya and Anurag Thakur son of Prem Kumar Dhumal, both are politically active and definitely will test their political career in the mainstream of state politics. Mandi and Kangra districts which tilt the scale in favour of BJP got reward this time and chief minister Jai Ram Thakur has proved the power his leadership and ha also proved the new centers of power when BJP won all Lok Sabha seats with record margin in Himachal Pradesh in 2019 general elections ⁵ (*The Indian Express*, May 26:2019).

Conclusion

The thirteenth assembly elections of Himachal Pradesh in 2017 has proved new in many terms. For Congress party it may have brought some exceptional results because maximum of its top leaders have lost their elections but by keeping in mind the history of electoral politics of state this was not much surprising for her. These elections have also proved diplomatic win for the Virbhadra bloc because now the path for his son is straight as a leader of Congress. This was hurry to pose this thesis but next assembly elections will decide the fate of his son. For the BJP side these elections brought dramatic changes. It has changed the top leadership of BJP and also shifted the center of its political activities especially electoral activities to a whole new centre and that is Mandi. The formation of new cabinet also cleared the intentions and futuristic vision of the party that it wants to make Kangra and Mandi the permanent stronghold of her. Two new things can happened in next assembly elections and which can be due to the outcomes of this elections and these can be that Virbhadra Singh from Congress side may not be the leading actor or may not contest next election due to his age and health issues and from BJP side the political inning of Prem Kumar Dhumal can be over and that is because of the outcomes and changes in BJP's party politics in the state. A whole era of Virbhadra Singh and Prem Kumar Dhumal's political rivalry can be over with this election. These would be the question of further explorations.

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⁵ There are total four Lok sabha seats in Himachal Pradesh, out of them from Hamirpur constituency, the BJP won by a vote margin of 3.99 lakh votes; in Kangra constituency by 4.77 lakh votes, in Mandi constituency by 4.05 lakh votes, and in Shimla constituency (reserved) seat the party won by a margin of 3.27 lakh votes.

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