J&K polls: Narendra Modi remains BJP's trump card

In 2008, Neelam Langeh lost his deposit after contesting from the Ramban Assembly on behalf of the J&K National Panther's Party.

Ask him how many votes he secured in the 2008 J&K Assembly elections and he parries the question four times with answers such as "I was contesting for a party that had no base" and "I came fourth". Pushed to recall the exact number of votes he secured, he responds, "I don't remember the exact figure, but I think it was around 1,250 votes."

The exact figure is 1,203 votes.

But, four days before voters in the reserved constituency of Ramban venture to polling booths to cast their votes, Langeh is now the frontrunner to clinch the seat.

Ask him why he thinks he will win, Langeh, now a BJP candidate, replies, "Modi ji."

Almost six months after leading the BJP to victory in the Lok Sabha elections, PM Narendra Modi remains the trump card for his party, even in far-flung areas of J&K.

Candidates like Langeh, who joined the party about a month before elections were announced, are banking on Modi's name and his connect with voters to win.

In the communally sensitive Kishtwar and Doda districts, BJP workers, most of them RSS swayamsewaks, joined the campaign to accomplish the

party's 'Mission 44' — winning 44 seats out of the total 87 to form the government in the state for the first time. They, too, are using Modi's name liberally to seek votes. Many of them don't know the local candidate's full name. "How does it matter? Election toh Modi ne hi jitana hai (Modi is going to win us the polls)," says one worker.

However, despite the party's bravado, the leadership knows that it's not going to be easy to even cross the 30-seat mark. That explains why the party's state unit has been sending distress signals to the central leadership to have more rallies by the PM, who is going to address his first rally in the state in Kishtwar Saturday.

"We have been told the PM is very busy and will be able to address only eight rallies. But that won't be enough. We have asked for at least 15 rallies. Let's see," says a BJP leader.

According to some leaders, another crucial factor aiding the BJP is the communal polarisation visible in Jammu, especially the Chenab Valley region comprising the Doda-Kishtwar belt.

"Polarisation toh hai hi. Aur humein fadeya pucca milega (Yes, there is polarisation, and it will definitely help us)," admits Langeh.

It also helps that while the BJP is confident of getting the majority of Hindu votes, the Muslim votes will get divided between the Congress, the National Conference and the People's Democratic Party.

"While we, too, have fielded many Muslims — Tariq Keen from Inderwal and Showkat Deng from Banihal, for example — even they are banking on Hindu votes to win. If the Muslim votes get divided, we will do much better," says a senior BJP leader.

However, Shuja Iqbal Khan, managing director of Doda-based Khan's Group and a BJP supporter, feels too much is being made of the BJP's pro-Hindutva stance.

"All this talk is nonsense by our opponents to get votes. I am a Muslim and I will be the first to vote for any party that talks of Islam and works for Muslims. But first show me that party. Modi is doing great work and that is why I'm supporting the BJP," he says.

In the outgoing Assembly, the Congress has five out of the total six seats from Doda, Kishtwar and Ramban districts, the turf of senior Congress leader and Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad.

In the Lok Sabha polls, Azad suffered a shock defeat to current MoS in the PMO Jitendra Singh, who got almost 61,000 votes more than Azad.

These elections will also decide the political future of Azad, and senior Congress leaders admit that crossing the double-digit mark is a priority for the party.

"Azad lost his own election and these elections are his chance to show that he is a leader. He and his group is controlling everything, from selection of candidates to campaigning. A bad showing will reduce his stature considerably," says a Congress leader.

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