

Healthy sign

Turnout numbers in the Assembly polls show distinct patterns in south Kashmir

One of the salubrious stories of Indian democracy has always been the regular and uninterrupted conduct of general and Assembly elections across provinces. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) was an aberration with no Assembly elections which should have been held five years ago. Thankfully, this denial of a key democratic process came to an end after three phases of elections were held across the Union Territory and, provisionally, 63.5% of the electorate turned up to vote. This number is marginally lower than the 65.7% registered in the 2014 Assembly polls (excluding Ladakh). The numbers could go up, but the marginal drop should be contextualised. The turnout in 2014 was a peak ever since the militancy that began in 1987 which had dampened voting numbers across the province in subsequent years. Many changes have happened in the last decade — the Governor dissolved J&K's elected Assembly on November 21, 2018; the province lost its special status a year later and, on its bifurcation into two Union Territories, lost its Statehood; and, a significant delimitation exercise led to new constituencies. But the electoral turnout now is still an encouraging number, considering the fact that the turnout in the general election in April-May 2024 was 58.5%.

Some other distinct patterns are discernible from the provisional turnout figures. Constituencies such as Shopian, Kulgam, Pulwama in south Kashmir and Baramulla in north Kashmir registered definite increases in turnout when compared to earlier Assembly polls. This was largely due to the presence of independent candidates supported by the banned Jamaat-e-Islami J&K in the south and Lok Sabha MP Engineer Rashid's Awami Ittehad Party in Baramulla, leading to greater contestation. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Union government has worked hard to change the political discourse in the Valley and to alter the dynamics of party politics. But if the contests, the political discourse and the turnout are any indication, the elections have not been held according to the script envisaged by the BJP. The electorate has sought to use the elections as a means to voice their grievances with President's Rule in the province — the securitised environment has dampened political activities beyond electoral campaigns. The regional parties have not limited their campaigns to bread and butter issues, also articulating demands for restoration of special status and a permanent solution to what they perceive to be unending conflict in the province. The poll results will indicate whether these demands have found resonance among the electorate, but it suffices to say that the elections herald the possibility of a return to normal democratic politics in J&K, aligning it more closely with the rest of the country.

