

THE INDIAN VOTER INSIDE OUT

Enter caste-plus politics

Voters say growth is no 1 concern but will still filter candidates through caste

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There has been much commentary about the changing nature of the Indian voter and debate about whether or not the vocabulary of Indian elections is finally transitioning from the politics of identity and clientelism to the politics of development. Several commentators have suggested that community, caste and religion are becoming outdated political idioms. They argue that the success of the UPA in the 2009 national elections, and of the BJP in the more recent state elections, is evidence that development matters most to Indian voters. Should this actually be the case it would be a significant milestone in the evolution of electoral politics in India. It is to shed light on questions such as this that Lok Foundation launched regular surveys of a large sample of households (65,000) across the country. The results bring to light three striking conundrums about voting behaviour in Indian elections.

SOCIAL INSECURITIES PERSIST

First, while the survey confirms that economic issues, including inflation in particular, are the most important electoral concerns for a large majority of Indian households, it also finds that a substantial majority of households

care more than they are willing to directly admit about the caste and ethnicity of their elected representative. A whopping 57% of households selected growth, inflation or personal income as their top concern for the next elections. Only 3% identified caste or religion as the most important electoral issue for them. However, when asked the question indirectly, 57% admitted to being uncomfortable with the idea of someone from another caste or ethnic group being elected from their constituency. Can persons whose bias is to have someone from their own community represent them vote beyond considerations of caste and religion? Given this revealed preference, are Indian voters really prepared to vote only on the basis of the economic issues which they profess to be their most pressing concern? It is possible that India has now entered the realm of "caste-plus" politics; caste is an important social filter through which voters assess candidates and parties, but it is a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. If one looks at community-wise support for the NDA (figure 1), there has been a significant positive swing among the upper castes, OBCs and less so among dalits. The NDA still struggles to garner Muslim votes and its support remains unchanged among adivasis. Social iden-

tity might inform vote choice but there is volatility within many social groups; since identity is constant, something else—the economy—could account for the changes.

GRAFT NO, CRIMINALS YES

After economic issues, the survey results indicate that corruption is the second most important voter concern. On average across the nation 21% of respondents picked corruption as the most important electoral issue for them. In certain states like Bihar, UP and Kerala, more than 30% picked corruption as the biggest issue. Yet, it is interesting that almost half of the same respondents across the country also revealed that electoral candidates with serious criminal records do not trouble them. Why is it that Indian voters profess to being fed up with corruption and yet are willing to tolerate high levels of criminality in politics?

SUBSIDIES MATTER ONLY TO 7%

Third, it is remarkable that even though economic issues strongly dominate the electoral concerns of a vast majority of voters, only 7% of the respondents identified benefits, subsidies and transfers from government that ought to be important for their economic well being as material to determining their voting choice.



As we try to make sense of these apparent paradoxes it is useful to remind ourselves of the wider context of developments of the past decade under UPA rule. This period has on average been one of exceptional economic growth. No matter how we measure it, it has seen a dramatic reduction in poverty. Between 2004 and 2012, for example, the share of the rural population under the poverty line as per the Tendulkar methodology came down from 45% to 26% and real wages and consumption in rural India saw very significant improvement. Since 2004, the penetration of rural telephony has leapt from 1% to 40% and thanks to massive investments in rural roads, the connectivity of villages to markets has created millions of non-farm jobs.

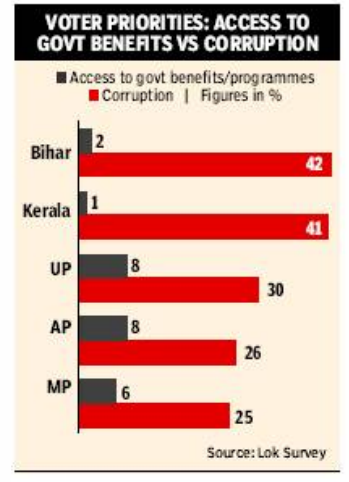
However, not all communities have benefited. The Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes have remained excluded. About 50% of the STs and 42% of SCs remain below the poverty line, while the OBCs seem to have made significant progress.

There has also been a secular decline in the delivery of public services under UPA rule. This has been particularly the case for urban India. Whether it is in the form of per capita access to piped water and flush toilets, solid waste disposal, sewage treatment, or access to public transportation or low cost housing, the quality of life for the growing urban population has deteriorated measurably over the past ten years. Even in rural India, one in five households still does not have access to any of the three basic services, namely electricity, latrines and drinking water. Per capita access to reliable and affordable healthcare has deteriorated, as have outcomes from public education across both urban as well as rural India. The evidence further suggests that subsidies and transfers through proliferating government schemes have become vul-

nerable to growing "leakages" and corruption, and therefore become less effective in delivering support for those who need it most. This is reflected in the percentage of voters who identified corruption, as opposed to access to government schemes, as their No 1 issue this poll year (figure 2).

Finally, much of the feel-good factor from our performance between 2004 and 2012 has dissipated because the sharp slowdown in GDP and corporate investment over the past couple of years has created huge uncertainty about future prospects for income generation and job creation. Moreover, stubbornly high inflation, especially food inflation, has eroded the hard-fought gains in real household incomes adding to frustration amongst voters.

In the light of the above, it is not surprising that economic issues dominate the list



of concerns, but voters remain socially insecure. Given the context of failing public service delivery and rising corruption, it is also understandable that Indian voters are desperately looking to get things done even if it means seeking the patronage of "strong men" or "fixers" with serious criminal records. Indeed, there appears to be a significant negative correlation between voter support for candidates with serious criminal charges and the quality of state-level governance. That is, as the quality of governance improves, popular support for criminal candidates decreases.

And given the growing mismanagement and mis-direction of government support schemes it makes sense that government transfers and subsidies do not figure as a material factor in determining electoral choice for the vast majority of voters.

The portrait that emerges from the Lok Survey is that of a very pragmatic, albeit socially prejudiced, Indian voter looking to make an electoral choice in pursuit of his or her economic interests by relying on candidates and parties that he/she thinks will deliver results in a context marked by weakening institutions, poor governance and increasing competition for upward social mobility. This paints a hopeful picture in that it does hold out the possibility that the political class in this country will increasingly have to focus on delivering economic and development outcomes to gain favour with the electorate. However, as long as the Indian voter is willing to tolerate criminality in politics and remains socially insecure there may be little incentive for the political class to change the way they operate. What lessons the winners and losers take away from the forthcoming polls will determine the quality of our political discourse.

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