

Voting Behaviour in India: Determinants that Shape Voter Perspective

Introduction: Wounds of our Colonial Past

The current political climate of India is extremely volatile involving disputes between religious and caste-based groups. While many believe that this aggression between groups has always existed in our social relations, the base of its present manifestation was formed during the British Colonial Knowledge project. This project had its roots in Orientalism, defining the Orient (the supposed mystic and exotic people of the East) the perception of the Occident (the progressive, educated and modern people of the West). The main purpose of the project was to make Indian Society reach a phase of modernity beneficial to the Western society allowing, them to exploit natural resources from their colony. The course to this modernity was to be achieved by the Colonial understanding of Indian society. The main sources through which the British Colonizers got their information was through the Ancient texts provided to them by the intellectual caste, mainly the Brahmin's. These texts were taken to be as static and timeless and applicable at any point of time in the history of India. Hence, a project of enumeration(the census) based on different bio-social characteristics took place, sowing the seeds for the problem of communalism today. How we view the person opposite to us based on their religion, caste or occupation (which is also connected to caste) is all a product of the Colonial Knowledge project.

The census brought up the question of separate electorates however, in Modern India elections are all about representation of social groups leading to a scenario where the will of the majority decides the fate of the minorities. Though our constitution has a few safeguards such as reservation, there are those who oppose it and deny its need. The main impact of the British Census was that it divided people on the basis of the social order it considered natural to India. A social order which was inherently oppressive and put human beings in a system where a few reaped the success of others hard labour. Due to the enumeration process, the social order of caste became internalized by the people of India different social positions of people are considered natural and the reasons to the condition of the person are not questioned. For example, the sweeper employed by the GHMC is seen as a person who has either made a choice to be a sweeper or could not excel in school to gain better skills. Her

caste as a restriction to basic amenities and her economic background making the facilitation of better education impossible is not considered. Our perception is thus, clouded by what we have come to understand as natural, is an outcome of the nexus of the orientalism school of knowledge and the British Colonial Project.

The adoption of the oriental divisions by the people of India has paved the way for the current Hindutva Hyper-nationalism that we witness in the campaign of the Bharati Janata Party aided by the RSS. The campaigning done by the BJP blatantly exploited the religious sentiment of the people, invoking a sense of duty to the “Dharm” and the nation, which according to Hindutva ideology go hand in hand. The once great mystic India where people had already reached the moon signify the leaning towards myth and mysticism and the ignorance towards science. By creating an “other” within India, the BJP feeds on the fear of the majority of the country, the other being the caste minorities, Muslims, Christians, Communists etc. The voter’s mindset is heavily influenced by the politics of hate, clouding their wishes of development and fuelling the rise of Hyper nationalism, where anyone who speaks against the nation or its government is anti-national.

Present Condition

Due to the way our country is spatially organized, the behaviour of voter is influenced by several factors such as religion, caste, community, language, money, policy or ideology, purpose of the polls, political wave etc. The political parties and groups make use of these variables for the sake of winning the battle of the ballot box. Despite making it seem like their allegiance is towards secularism and the constitution of India, politicians can be found making appeals to the religious and communal sentiments of the people; they can also be found involved in exploiting the factors of language or money to achieve the purpose of emerging successful in the war of votes. Appeals are issued and canvassing campaigns conducted in the name of a particular policy or ideology for the same purpose. The interest of the voters and accordingly their behaviour at the time of voting is also influenced by the nature or purpose of the elections or the extent of the suffrage.

Factors-

Charisma: One important factor that attracts voters to a certain leader is Charisma. It is basically some exceptional quality or narrative of a leader that trumps over other elements and becomes a source of attraction and reverence for the people, it also means a source of awe and terror that frightens the people in large numbers not to speak or dare to do anything against the wishes of the mighty leader. The ability of a leader to sell his/her narrative so clearly via the use of symbols that represent their campaign, leaving no shred of doubt amongst his supporters influences the elections in a large scale.

Caste: Caste continues to be a determinant of voting behaviours in India. It has deep roots in the society and constitutes an important basis of social relations at all levels. Despite the adoption of several provisions which prohibit action and discrimination on its basis, caste continues to be a determinant of political behaviours. Politicisation of caste and casteism in politics has been a well-known reality of the Indian political system. The political parties in India, without any exception, while formulating their policies, programmes and election strategies always keep in mind the caste factor. Caste is a factor in the selection of candidates for contesting an election from a constituency. Votes are demanded in the name of cast. Caste is a strong factor in both rural and urban India. Despite the adoption of democratic values which conceive of a society free from casteism, caste continues to characterise politics in India. Indeed, it has become one of the chief means by which the Indian masses have been attached to the process of democratic politics

However, realization of one's caste identity could also be a way for marginalized communities to highlight the socio-economic inequalities and the instances of caste violence they face. For example, the Dalit social movement led by Jignesh Mevani served that very purpose.

Nationalism: In recent times, the elections in India have been marred with rallying calls for the protection the nation. Those who answer the call reaffirm their identity as Indians according to vast majority taking part in this movement. Voters tend to vote for leaders who they believe will protect the nation from the internal and external anti-India forces. Nationalism as a political tool used to garner votes also tends to evaporate rational factors that the voter should look at before voting. The voter will overlook factors such as unemployment, slow growth, poor infrastructure, lack of education and health services etc and vote for the supposed protection of the nation.

Domination of religion in the mainstream political discourse: By guaranteeing right to freedom of religion to everyone, treating every religion equal and non – recognition of any religion as a state religion , India has not been successful in preventing the role of religion as determinant of political behaviour in general and voting behaviour in particular. Religious pluralism of the Indian society is a major feature of the environment of Indian political system and it greatly influences the struggle for power among political parties. The selection of candidates is done with an eye upon the presence of a religious majority in a particular constituency. The candidates do not hesitate to seek votes by playing the religious card with co-religious voters and the secular card with members of others religious communities. Use of religious places for political ends is also a standard practice, particularly during elections. The religionization of social-political issues is again resorted to by political parties and other groups. The voters very often vote on religious considerations.

The secular nature of India mandates that all religions be viewed as equal in the eyes of the state, however the treatment regarding that religion should be on the basis of the magnitude of followers and influence. The state must keep all religions equidistant from itself but in the case of India, politicians enter the state mechanism using religion based politics and thus undermine the secular value of the state

Language: India is a multi-lingual state. Linguism also serves as factor in voting behaviour. The organization of states on linguistic basis fully reflects the importance of language as a factor of politics in India. There have been problems in states like that of status of one particular language in that state or relating to the quality of the status of a language of a state. Since people have emotional attachment with their languages, they easily get influenced whenever there comes up any issue relating to language. Linguistic interests always influence voting behaviour.

Money Factor: India is a poor country with a large number of people living below poverty line. Money as such plays a vital role in determining voting behaviour of the people in India. A rich candidate or party has always better chances of winning the elections. But it is to be pointed out here that it happens only in normal circumstances and not during a wave – election or when other key issues are involved. Wealth is also used in the forms of bribes to buy votes, but the during a wave-election, the money/alcohol/food does not influence the voter who has already decided who to cast his/her vote for.

Sub-Nationalism: Ethnic pluralism, communalism, regionalism and sub-nationalism are the hard realities of Indian society. Of late sub-nationalism has become a crucial factor in influencing the voting behaviour of the people. At times a secessionist group gives a call for the boycott of elections and uses pressure tactics to force the voters either not to vote in favour of a particular party. Such actions of some political parties have at times influenced some people to organize themselves on narrow and parochial lines.

Performance of the Party in Power: Each Political party contests elections on the basis of an election manifesto, and after coming into power, it is expected to fulfil the promises made. Good or bad performance of the ruling party just based on the election promises made and promises fulfilled, influences the basic behaviour of the people in a big way. This has happened mainly because of a corresponding increase in the number of floating voter or switchers who are mostly young men and women from educated upper middle class and are ready to shift their support from one party to another on the basis of their performance.

Failure of the opposition to provide a viable alternative: One reason why parties using tools such as nationalism and communalism come back into power is due to the inability of the opposition to provide a viable alternative to the people of India. Taking the recent election as an example, the reason why people opted to vote for government which was unable to deliver on its promise of development and instead weakened the existing constitutional structures of India was due to the opposition not being able to get its message across and not capitalizing well enough on the faults of the government. The people of India got swayed by the call of nationalism and Hindu Dharm Raksha(out of the many other things) due to incapable opposition which was not able to unite in this war against fascism and offer the people a chance to vote for a different mode of development which could be beneficial to the country.

Mass literacy: Mass literacy has been another factor of voting behaviour in India. It is because of this weakness of the people that political parties, communal groups and militant outfits, are in a position to exploit the sentiments of the people in the name of caste, religion, region and other such factor. The votes of the illiterate constitute a big proportion of the votes polled and hence it plays a big role in determining the outcomes of elections. However, the fault also lies in the hands of the political parties, that are in power or not in power, and are unable to provide the masses that suffer due to government negligence of public welfare

policies, a chance to vote on the lines of development and nation-building. All parties are guilty of playing the same dirty divisive politics in India and the people suffer due to it.

Factionalism: The Indian Political life, from the village level to the national level, is characterized by factionalism. No political party, nor even the cadre-based BJP and the two communist parties is free from factionalism. It has adversely affected the strength of the congress is a political party with glorious past, a weak present and not a bright future. Other parties are also suffering from factionalism. The voters are getting disenchanted with some of the political parties because of their inability to overcome factionalism. They are turning to locally organized parties or regional parties which, because of their small organizational network and limited operational based are relatively less affected by factionalism.

Public Perception of the Candidate: A candidate report with the people with constituency or his/her known qualities or contribution in any value spread of activity always acts as a factor of voting behaviour. Apart from his party's loyalty or opinion on various issue and problem, a voter while making his choice always takes into account the nature and level of his association with the candidate. A positive image of a party's candidate is a source of popular support for the party. A voter prefers to vote for a candidate who seems approachable and who can help him in anyway. People tend to turn towards candidates who they deem favourable to their cause. The public perception of the candidate that the voters would want to see varies from place to place and depends on the level of communalization, development, religionization and of a place.

Election campaigns: Each party launches a vigorous election campaign for influencing the voters in its favour. Use of such means as mass meetings, street meetings, personal contacts, posters, speeches by film stars, TV and Radio broadcasts, newspaper advertisement, hand bills, processions and propaganda is made to win votes, particularly the fence-sitter votes. Election Campaign is designed to make a voter believe that his interest can be best served by the party, the candidate of the party contesting from his constituency poll. Even campaigning plays a role in influencing the choice of the voters. A party which is in a position to create an impression through its election campaign that it has a chance to win can earn some additional votes as several voters try to side with the side which they perceive to be a winning side.

Campaigns are both used to propagate a certain candidate or defame a candidate from the opposing side. Highlighting the corruption charges or flaws of a candidate does a lot of harm to the public perception and enables the opposition to capitalize on those lost votes.

Issues pertaining to a specific area: The mentality of the voter varies due to the difference in their socio-economic and political environment. In the case of Ayodhya and Sabarimala, the voters due to their social rearing will vote for the party that either maintains the status quo of the area or radically changes it. However, in some areas in Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, the residents of the villages have refused to vote due to the ignorance the state has displayed on the question of the development within the villages.

Bandwagon Effect: The EC in India has banned the airing of opinion polls and exit during the phases of elections to stop any possibility of a bandwagon effect, where voters from a different area change their vote after seeing the dominance of a certain party in an earlier election just to be on the winning side. The bandwagon effect however only applies to that batch of voters who are undecided as to who they want to vote for. Due to the large percentage of Hindu voters in India, who are split as to who to vote for in terms of development, protection of religious sentiment or nationalism. The minority vote is mostly for self-preservation due to the socio-economic inequalities they face. The fence-sitter has no urgent worry of safety and has the luxury of considering the variety of narratives the political parties offer.

Conclusion: There must be a huge change in terms of the political parties that are contesting in India and their practices. The practise of using caste as a political tool in order to get votes must be stopped in exchange for using caste in order to facilitate a social movement for the betterment of those specific people. Same goes for the case of religious minorities. In order for India to rise as a superpower, the internal violence that takes place against the minorities of all sorts must be stopped. This violence and fear of the “other” is what clouds our perception and understanding as to what’s best for the nation. While on the development front, the candidates must shift their focus on making pro-public institutions and strengthening the ones that are already in place. The health and literacy indicators of India are extremely poor and in order to counter this, more money has to be invested in the public sector.



Rashad Khan, Intern @ IPS, 2019

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