

Foreign Policy and Voting Pattern in India

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Executive Summary

For almost all Indian voters, foreign policy is not an important determinant in the elections. However, the issues related to it do, to a certain extent, influence decisions of a number of voters. This is especially in the states which border one of the neighbouring countries. In some states, foreign policy-related issues have almost turned into a significant domestic issue which affect the day to day lives of people so it determines the voting behaviour of a large number of people living there. This paper looks at the impact of foreign policy-related issues on voters. It argues that such issues influence voters only when they take on a local angle and affect their lives.

Introduction

In the first half of 2019, India is going to have parliamentary elections to constitute the 17th Lok Sabha. Much like in the past, this election will likely be contested, mainly, on domestic policies, constituency level issues and incumbency factors. Foreign policy does not really play a significant role in winning or losing of an election. Former Foreign Secretary of India, Shyam Saran feels that it depends on context and enumerated few issues which may be used in poll campaigns.¹

However, its influence on voting behaviour varies from one individual to another and may not be direct but the issues related to foreign policy do have some, though limited, impact on voter behaviour. Out of India's 29 states, all, except five – Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Telangana – share proximate or distant territorial or maritime borders with one or the other neighbouring countries. People from Indian states, such as West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Punjab, Rajasthan, Jammu & Kashmir, Gujarat, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, also share ethnicity with the people from the other side of their respective borders.

Domestic Significance of Foreign Policy Related Issues

Issues such as the National Register of Citizens update and 'illegal' immigration from Bangladesh do matter to a large number of people in the northeast of India, particularly in Assam, and, to an extent, determines their voting behaviour. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promised to address the issue of infiltration and illegal immigrants in the northeast region on a priority basis, through clear policy directions

¹ "Wide Angle, Episode 59: 'Will Foreign Policy be a Campaign Issue in the 2019 Elections?'" (The Wire, 21 January 2019) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JFr-Ax_JUk&list=PLzia1qLN9v2DmqZZ7ayQ8_gDaexTy8NCs. Accessed on 21 February 2019.

and effective control at the ground level.² Likewise, in the Assam Vision Document 2016-2025 issued by the state office of the Assam Unit of the BJP, the party begins with state security focussing on insurgency and terrorism followed by a sub-section on infiltration. The document lists the complete sealing of the Indo-Bangladesh border in Assam, scrutinizing the citizenship of all suspected residents of the state, populating villages along the Indo-Bangla border with ex-servicemen to assist the police and other security forces towards prevention of infiltration, strengthening the Border Wing of the Assam Police in coordination with the Border Security Force and to penalise organisations that employ “infiltrators”.³ The document also talks about implementation of the Assam Accord of 1985 in spirit and words, and endeavoured to ‘provide livelihood and rehabilitation to the families of the martyrs of Assam Movement’.⁴ The party also promised all northeast states to have a *Khilonjia Sarkar* – a government made up of locals that works in their interest – instead of the one which draws strength and support from the immigrants.⁵ These strategies have paid off for the BJP. It is in power in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya (with alliance partner), Nagaland (with alliance partner), Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur (with coalition partners).

As the NRC process is still going on and the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill,⁶ which was introduced by the BJP government, are foreign policy related issues, they are going to be used by the ruling party in the northeast of India to seek votes. Speaking in Lakhimpur in Assam on 17 February 2019, the BJP President, Amit Shah, raised both issues and said that the BJP “will not allow Assam to become another Kashmir” and that it will deport every infiltrator through the NRC.⁷

In other Indian states where foreign policy related issues have mattered during elections is Tamil Nadu. The ethnic bonding between the Tamils from India and Sri Lanka have political impact in the state politics of Tamil Nadu. For example, in the 2009 parliamentary elections the regional political party Dravid Munnetra Kazagham (DMK) won 18 of 39 seats in the state ‘despite the disadvantages of incumbency and its membership of the ruling coalition in Delhi’.⁸ In that election the DMK manifesto had a sub heading: the Sri Lankan Tamils issue. Under that the party briefly talked about its history of agitation for the rights of Sri Lankan Tamils. In its manifesto, the party also published a letter by then-Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh, to then-Chief Minister of the state, K Karunanidhi, in which the former wrote:

“We (the government) are in constant touch with the authorities in Sri Lanka. Contacts are being maintained at several levels, including at the very highest level. Our Foreign Secretary was recently in Colombo where he had another round of

² “Ek Bharat, Shreshta Bharat: Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas” BJP Election Manifesto 2014. https://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf. Accessed on 20 January 2019.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Baruah, Sanjib. “The Fire in Assam” (The Indian Express, 15 January 2019). <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/assam-protests-citizenship-amendment-bill-nrc-5538446/>. Accessed on 15 January 2019.

⁶ The bill was passed in the lower house but lapsed because it could not pass by the upper house in its last meeting in February 2019.

⁷ “Won’t Let Assam Become Another Kashmir”: Amit Shah On Citizens’ List” (NDTV, 17 February 2019). <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pulwama-terror-attack-amit-shah-says-terrorists-will-not-be-spared-1994918>.

⁸ Menon, Shiv Shankar (2016) *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy*. Penguin: Gurgaon. p 153.

discussions with his counterpart, the Defence Secretary, the Secretary to the President. He also met President Rajapaksa. Our concerns regarding the plight of the Tamils were explicitly reiterated...”⁹

To examine if India’s relationship with Sri Lanka may have been a reason for the good performance of the DMK in those elections, the author discussed the issue with a number of voters from Tamil Nadu. A significant number of them stated that India’s relationship with Sri Lanka does matter to them. Some also said that the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka and the Indian political parties’ attitude towards the issue influences their votes. Notably, after the end of the last Elam war (2006-2009) in which a large number of innocent people from the Tamil population, besides militants from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam, were butchered by the Sri Lankan state, the Tamil Nadu state banned the Sri Lankan cricket team from playing in the state. In 2013, in a letter to Manmohan Singh, then-Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, J Jayalalithaa, stated that as the people in Tamil Nadu had been angered by “barbaric acts” carried out on the Sri Lankan Tamils, her government felt that the Indian Premier League (IPL) matches involving Sri Lankan players, umpires and other officials should not be played in Tamil Nadu”.¹⁰ In 2013, in the meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government, Prime Minister Singh skipped the meeting and was represented by a cabinet minister because the Congress’ coalition partner, the DMK, was against his attendance in Colombo.

More than these examples, the country whose name one hears the most during the Indian elections is Pakistan. This is not limited to one part of the country. The violent activities of the Pakistan-based militant groups, and the involvement of its intelligence agency in flaming insurgency and militancy in India, are considered as the prime reasons for India’s anger towards the country. Politically, the anger is being tapped on by the Indian political parties to get votes. In recent years, during the Bihar assembly elections in 2015, Shah, in an election rally in Raxaul, made a statement that “if by any chance the BJP is defeated in these (Bihar) elections, crackers will be burst in celebration in Pakistan. Would you like that to happen?”¹¹ Then in 2017, in the Gujarat assembly elections, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an election rally at Palanpur, stated that Pakistan is going to play an important role in Gujarat elections. This was in context of a dinner which was hosted by ex-Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyer for former Pakistani foreign Minister Khurshed Kasuri, a few days before the rally. It was also attended by the former Vice President of India, Hamid Ansari and Dr Singh among others.¹² In both elections, the use of Pakistan has not paid electoral dividends. BJP lost the assembly elections in Bihar and just managed to retain power in Gujarat. It shows that local issues played a more decisive role.

⁹ Lok Sabha Election Manifesto - 2009 Dravid Munnetra Kazhagam. <https://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/PDFs/wahlen/manifesto-dmk.pdf>. Accessed on 18 February 2019.

¹⁰ “IPL cricket: India’s Tamil Nadu bars Sri Lanka players” (BBC, 26 March 2013). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-21938471> Accessed on 12 March 2018.

¹¹ Pandey, Chandra Bhushan. “If BJP loses in Bihar, crackers will go off in Pakistan, Amit Shah says” (The Times of India, 30 October 2015) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/bihar-elections-2015/news/If-BJP-loses-in-Bihar-crackers-will-go-off-in-Pakistan-Amit-Shah-says/articleshow/49584833.cms>. Accessed on 12 December 2017.

¹² Langa, Mahesh. “Islamabad is trying to fix Gujarat polls” (The Hindu, 11 December 2017). <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/why-does-pak-army-ex-dg-want-ahmed-patel-as-gujarat-cm-asks-modi/article21385192.ece>. Accessed on 15 December 2017.

Like in the past, in the 2019 elections Pakistan is likely to be an important campaign issue for the political parties, mainly the BJP. In his interview in January 2019 to *The Wire*, Saran said that relations with Pakistan, such as surgical strikes carried out in 2016 or other successful steps the government has taken to counter Pakistan may come up.¹³ This looks more obvious after the Pulwama attack in which 40 soldiers from the Central Reserve Police Force were killed by a militant. Pakistan based militant organization Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) took the responsibility for that attack. After the attack, India revoked the Most Favoured Nation status it has given under the World Trade Organization rule in 1996 to Pakistan. In one of his rallies after the attack, Modi said that the time for talks are over. On 26 February 2019, the Indian Air Force carried out “non-military” and “pre-emptive” air strikes at a JeM training camp at Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan.¹⁴ Soon after the air strikes, in a public meeting on 26 February 2019 at Churu in Rajasthan, Modi congratulated the Air Force and paid homage to the brave hearts.¹⁵ The All India Trinamool Congress party leader, and Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, and the Congress party sought details of the air strikes. Attacking them, in a public rally in Patna on 3 March 2019, Modi said:

“I want to know from the Congress and other parties why they are bent on destroying the morale of the armed forces. Why is the Congress giving speeches where enemies are benefitting? When we had to stand united against terror factories, 21 parties united for questioning us”.¹⁶

Nepal, is an eastern neighbour of India, sharing religious, cultural and ethnic similarities and with very strong people-to-people relations. Despite such closeness, from time to time few differences crop up between the two countries. However, unlike, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, as discussed above, internal issues in Nepal and its differences with India have never affected the lives of a significant population living on the India-Nepal border. Therefore, they have never been an electoral issue. My interviews with the people living around the India-Nepal border in Bihar, showed that even when New Delhi and Kathmandu had any disagreements, they did not have any such problems with their counterparts from Nepal and used to continue their cross-border business.

Conclusion

The use of foreign policy issues in campaigns, as stated by Saran, depends on context, but those which affect day to day lives of people from a region do influence the voting behaviour

¹³ “Wide Angle, Episode 59: ‘Will Foreign Policy be a Campaign Issue in the 2019 Elections?’” (The Wire 21 January 2019) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JFr-Ax_JUk&list=PLzia1qLN9v2DmqZZ7ayQ8_gDaexTy8NCs. Accessed on 21 February 2019.

¹⁴ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs “Statement by Foreign Secretary on 26 February 2019 on the Strike on JeM training camp at Balakot” (26 February 2019). https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31091/Statement_by_Foreign_Secretary_on_26_February_2019_on_the_Strike_on_JeM_training_camp_at_Balakot. Accessed on 4 March 2019.

¹⁵ “PM Narendra Modi’s Speech At Rally In Rajasthan’s Churu: Highlights” (NDTV, 26 February 2019). <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/prime-minister-narendra-modi-addresses-public-rally-in-rajasthans-churu-highlights-1999507>. Accessed on 4 March 2019.

¹⁶ “Chun Chun Ke”: PM Modi Warns Pak, Rips Into Opposition At Bihar Rally” (NDTV, 3 March 2019). <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/theres-a-competition-to-abuse-the-chowkidar-but-hes-fully-alert-pm-at-poll-campaign-launch-in-bihar-2001929>. Accessed on 4 March 2019.

of a large number of people in those constituencies. In Northeast India, issues such as immigration are not only related to the foreign policy of India but has deep impact on the demography of the region. Likewise, in Tamil Nadu, the issue of Sri Lankan Tamils is an emotional factor due to ethnic bonding between the Tamils from the two countries. It does not affect many but to some it is an issue. Unlike them, as seen above, whatever the status of relationships between India and Nepal, it hardly has any impact on the people living at border areas.

Besides border sharing states of India, as discussed above, India's relationship with Pakistan has been used in the past in different parts of India by the political parties to gain votes. In the upcoming elections Pakistan would be used in the campaigns by almost all political parties, mainly by the BJP. Already, the political parties have started applauding or asking for evidence for the non-military and pre-emptive strikes carried by India at Balakot in Pakistan. In the 2019 general elections, the Pakistan issue may influence a number of middle-class voters, especially in north and western India, but its efficacy to become an important voting determinant has to be observed.

Looking at political parties, most of the national parties have a section or sub-section on foreign policy in their election manifesto, but a number of regional parties do not talk about foreign policy unless it affects their respective regions. As mentioned above, the DMK had a sub-section on Tamil Nadu in the 2009 elections. Likewise, the regional parties from the northeast have agendas on immigration in their respective manifestos. For example, the Assam Gana Parishad has constituted a committee to finalise their manifesto for the upcoming elections. In the manifesto, the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill is an important item. Hence, the use of foreign policy and related issues by the political parties depends on whether it is able to attract voters. Even the voters are only influenced by foreign policy related issues which affect their daily lives. A large number of them are still influenced by their constituency-level issues or domestic policies of the incumbent. Factors such as unemployment, inflation, corruption, political leadership, caste, sub-caste, religion etc., still remain powerful voting determinants.

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