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Indian Elections 2009: Why the 'Y' Factor Matters

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Preface

India will hold its 15th general elections in April/May 2009. The elections will take place in challenging circumstances. A variety of cross-cutting political, security, economic and socio-cultural issues will influence the elections. The exercise will be impacted by multiple parties, personalities and positions from India's vast political spectrum.

As India moves into the election mode, the Institute of South Asian Studies is bringing out a series of papers analysing different aspects of the forthcoming elections. These will include, among others, the key national and regional parties, and their strategies, key political personalities, and the issues that are likely to have an impact on the elections.

This paper, the second in the series, examines the role of the youth in influencing the outcome of the elections.

Introduction

India's imminent parliamentary elections will be interesting to watch for the impact of a variety of interesting variables. These include the delimitation of electoral constituencies, importance of regional parties, and local agendas and increasing significance of fruitful electoral alliances. Added to this, another critical factor which is important to study is the 'youth factor'.

With 65 per cent of India's voters being under the age of 35 (including one hundred million first-time voters), the young make up a sizeable chunk of the electorate. In fact, the Indian electorate of 2009 will be the youngest since 1952.² It is tough to ignore the importance of the youth in the elections after the role played by the youth in the historic victory of President Obama. The youth wing of his campaign was enthusiastic in mobilising support for

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² The Indian Express, "When Pappu goes to vote", Seema Chishti, 28 December 2008.

America's 48-year-old president by making use of the internet and by selling the fact that he was someone with whom the youth could easily connect.

Seeing the significance of the large percentage of young voters in the upcoming election, massive campaigns have been kicked off by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and political parties for encouraging youngsters to vote. One of these campaigns, "Jaagore (which means 'wake up')! One billion votes campaign", is trying to get approximately four million young people across 35 cities to register as voters. The 'Jaagore' experiment is using the internet and has received support from leading corporate brands like Tata Tea. While such campaigns and efforts are significant and show the interest of civil society stakeholders in involving the youth in elections, it is also interesting to see overtures being made by political parties for attracting young voters. All political parties appear to have realised that the 'y factor' will be crucial in the upcoming elections of 2009.

Political Parties and Their Thrust on Wooing Younger Voters

If one were to look at the initiatives being taken by political parties to woo the youth, it would not be wrong to say that the Congress Party has taken the lead in recognising the fact that young voters have a pivotal role to play in the upcoming elections. This might be because of the key role being played by Mr Rahul Gandhi, one of India's most prominent young leaders, in Congress Party's election campaign. Indeed, Rahul Gandhi, the General Secretary of the Congress Party and being tipped by many as a future Prime Minister, has been travelling all over the country to focus on strengthening the state units of the youth congress, revamping election procedures as well as strengthening the enrolment drives. He has aired his discomfort on the excessive centralisation of decision-making in the Congress Party and wants the youth to play a more proactive role in the decision-making process. He has also reiterated his intention of demolishing the "wall", which is obstructing the young from joining politics.³ According to him, "In India, political parties have a nomination system in their parties. Who holds which position is decided at the top. In this system, the voice of the youth is drowned".⁴

It is also important to note that Rahul Gandhi has also admitted on more than one occasion that a major lacuna of Indian polity is that politics in India is dynastic – in order to rise in India's polity, it is important to enjoy support and patronage of the family. He has been further quoted, "I would not have been here, if I was not from a political family. If you do not have money, a family or friends, you cannot enter politics."⁵ His emphasis on a more transparent system of elections to the Youth Congress and National Students Union of India is reportedly an attempt to induct more young people who do not have family patronages in the party. In this regard, the services of former Chief Election Commissioners, J. M. Lyngdoh and T. S. Krishnamurthy, who now run an NGO called the Foundation for Advanced Management of Elections (FAME), are being used to ensure transparency and efficiency in the election process.⁶ Rahul Gandhi has also proposed that at least 30 per cent of seats to be contested by the Congress Party should be reserved for younger leaders. This proposal was supported by the senior leaders of the party like Veerappa Moily. In the recently held

³ The Mint, "Give more tickets to youth leaders: Rahul Gandhi", 8 February 2009.

⁴ The Times of India, "Rahul wants to end dynasty politics", 20 October 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The Indian Express, "For clean polls in Cong youth wings, Rahul turns to former ECs", Suman K. Jha, 1 September 2008.

assembly elections for six states, several new youth leaders got tickets from the Congress Party.

Apart from Rahul Gandhi, there are several prominent young leaders from the Congress Party who are active in wooing the youth. The 'young brigade' in the Congress Party comprises Jyotiraditya Scindia, Jitin Prasad, Sachin Pilot, Milind Deora and Sandeep Dikshit. These young leaders are being supported in their efforts by senior leaders like Veerappa Moily, Janardhan Reddy, G. B. Patnaik and Digvijay Singh. Indeed, a key senior leader like Mr Pranab Mukherjee (Minister of External Affairs and concurrently holding the Finance portfolio) and Digvijay Singh have gone to the extent of suggesting that Rahul Gandhi is capable of handling the position of Prime Minister. This is clearly an attempt by the Congress Party to project a 'young' leader as a possible prime ministerial candidate and attract the young votes.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is also leaving no stone unturned in order to attract the 'Gen-Next' of India's voters. The BJP's prime ministerial candidate Mr L.K. Advani has also been trying to ensure that the party connects meaningfully with the youth of the country. For this purpose, he has decided to use the internet extensively. Mr Advani has set up his own website (www.lkadvani.in) and is also trying to attract the youth through popular interactive online forums like the 'Facebook'. Apart from using internet instruments, the youth wing of the party also plans to distribute stickers like "Advani for PM". The octogenarian leader also plans to visit schools and colleges to attract more young people towards the BJP. Mr Advani admits that he is trying to successfully reproduce the Obama campaign. Addressing a gathering in Bangalore on 12 January 2009, he announced the launch of a national service mission 'ek kaam desh ke naam', wherein he exhorted young minds to "undertake voluntary activities across the nation."⁷ Interestingly in Advani's own constituency of Gandhi Nagar in the state of Gujarat, there are a large number of first-time voters, out of which approximately 40 per cent are below the age of 35. One more method which the party is using for wooing the youth is the attempt to attract celebrities to campaign for the party and contest elections. There was recently speculation that the party is trying to rope in former Indian captain and well-known cricketer Anil Kumble in contesting elections.

Other political parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party have also been making statements that in the coming elections they will allot large numbers (up to 50 per cent) of seats to young candidates. Mr Akhilesh Yadav, the son of Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav, a prominent leader and ex-Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, is an upcoming leader of the SP. The party is also focussing on popular youth icons, such as the famous Bollywood film star Sanjay Dutt, on contesting the elections. In regional parties such as the National Conference, Shiv Sena, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), younger leaders are playing key roles. Mr Omar Abdullah's nomination as the Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir is a significant milestone marking the enhanced importance of the youth in India's contemporary politics.

It needs to be noted, however, that despite larger participation and growing prominence of the younger leaders, most of them are actually products of dynastic politics. This holds true for leaders from both national parties like the Congress Party (such as Rahul Gandhi, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot, Milind Deora and Sandeep Dikshit) as well as those from the regional

⁷ The Indian Express, "Advani plans to rope in youth", Suman K. Jha, 13 December 2008.

parties [such as Omar Abdullah (National Conference), Uddhav Thackeray (Shiv Sena), Sukhbir Badal (SAD) and Dayanidhi Maran (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK))].

Are the Youth Active Participants in the Democratic Process?

A recent study on “Indian Youth in a Transforming World: Attitudes and Perceptions”, by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and its civil society partners Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), provides some interesting insights on the attitude of the Indian youth towards the Indian democracy.

According to the report, while 48 per cent of the Indian youth believe strongly in democracy, 27 per cent are indifferent, with two per cent having a weak faith in democracy. Further, more than two-thirds of the Indian youth realise that their votes make a difference to the outcome of elections. At the same time, 66 per cent feel that their vote makes a difference to how things are run in India.⁸ The report clearly reiterates the point that the Indian youth cannot and should not be taken as insignificant and indifferent segments of the electorate; they are actually capable of making significant differences to the electoral outcomes.

It is too early in the day, however, to assume that the youth would vote on any one issue for a number of reasons. First, it is important to note that the youth of India may not vote merely as youth but typically on familiar lines of caste, region and religion. The CSDS study clearly brings out the fact that the Muslim youth in the country feel alienated from the mainstream as they perceive discrimination with respect to employment opportunities. These sentiments might indicate a voting pattern guided by communal sentiments. Similarly, there could be other age-neutral social and cultural factors that are significant in determining the votes of the youth. Second, it is crucial to understand that apart from divisions like caste and religion, there are also multiple opinions among the youth on what are the perceived ‘important’ issues. This is similar to what prevails in other segments of the electorate as well, thereby making it difficult to ascertain which way ‘young’ Indians will vote.

In terms of critical issues, the CSDS report reveals that more than half (54 per cent) of the Indian youth were most concerned about unemployment and poverty. While 44 per cent feel that unemployment is most important, 25 per cent of them are concerned about terrorism. With regard to India’s relations with the United States, 39 per cent oppose United States’ domination, while 34 per cent favour a good relationship with the country. Seeing these figures, it would be safe to assume that apart from bread and butter issues, matters of terrorism and foreign policy are also important and cannot be relegated to the background. However, what remains to be seen is that to what extent the youth, irrespective of their concerns, actually vote, since in the recent past the youth have at times shown their indifference to elections.

One more significant statistic emanating from the CSDS report is that 70 per cent of the youth are not familiar with the concept of globalisation. So the majority of India’s ‘Gen-Next’ is not familiar with globalisation, a fact which may not determine the outcome of the elections, but is definitely an eye-opener as far as working out strategies for reaching out to the youth is concerned. Similarly, another finding smashes the assumption that the internet is a safe way to connect with India’s youth since only 12 per cent of India’s youth are found

⁸ The Indian Express, “When Pappu goes to vote”, Seema Chishti, 28 December 2008.

using the internet frequently. So unlike the United States, where the Obama campaign could rely extensively on the internet, it would be tough to replicate this model in India. Further, among the young accessing the internet frequently, many might not be influenced to vote one way or the other simply because they are being asked to do so through the internet.

While it is not possible to specify the exact nature of the impact the youth are likely to have on the outcome of the 2009 elections, there is no denying that they will play a vital role in shaping the final results. This makes preparation for elections that much tougher for political parties. At the same time, this also makes the current Indian elections one of the most interesting in recent times.

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