



## Every vote counts

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Even as the capital and the national media are recovering from one expression of “democracy” showcased at Jantar Mantar, turnout figures reported from

Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry have brought back the issue of relevance of voting and incidence of non-voting. Of course, there are pro-democracy souls in India who believe that the Internet, e-mails, Facebook and blogs are more “real” democratic expressions than “outmoded” democratic instruments such as voting. So, how does one look at the fact that voters in large numbers continue to turn out to the polling stations?

For starters, the robust turnout figures (pegged at 85.2 per cent for Puducherry, 75.2 per cent for Tamil Nadu and 74.4 per cent for Kerala), do not really make a story. These states (and Puducherry) have a history of more or less the same range of voter turnout. In particular, Kerala has always had a voter turnout of 70-plus per cent, except in the 1971 and 1980 Lok Sabha elections. In assembly elections, right from 1957, it has never gone below that mark. Turnouts in Tamil Nadu have been a little more chequered. There was a consistent downslide from 1984 (73 per cent) reaching a low of 58/59 per cent in 1999/2001. In Puducherry, we have consistently witnessed high turnout, ever since 1964. Also, the southern states generally, but

Kerala and Tamil Nadu particularly, always record a higher turnout than the national average (with the exception of 1998-99 when Tamil Nadu recorded a lower turnout than the national average).

Secondly, in most states of India, voter turnout in an assembly election is higher than in a Lok Sabha election. The difference varies from state to state, but the trend is the same. In this high turnout region, that difference is less: during the last decade, the difference in Kerala has been just about 2 per cent; and in Tamil Nadu too, the difference between the 2009 parliamentary election and this election is just 2 per cent. However, the difference between the 2004 Lok Sabha election (60.8) and the 2006 assembly election was huge: 10 per cent. The difference is partly attributable to the greater degree of mobilisation that usually occurs around assembly elections and the possibility that voters relate to state-level elections much more than they do in the case of parliamentary elections.

The issue of turnout often throws up three fascinating questions.

One question is the relationship between turnout and outcome. While this question needs a state-by-state analysis, in all probability there is no intrinsic relation between turnout and the likelihood of the sitting government being voted out or returned to power. Much depends on the kind of mobilisation that takes place during an election campaign and the social sections targeted by different political parties. Thus, it is quite possible that low turnout would mean failure of the ruling parties to mobilise their voters and hence a likelihood of defeat. So, rather than turnout alone, it is the texture and direction of mobilisation that would often make the difference.

The second issue is about non-voters. Idealists would want an even greater turnout and fault either the voters or the system for non-voting. This idealism needs to be contextualised not only with voting figures in other democracies, but two

other factors. One is simply that there is a possibility of our electoral rolls being slightly inflated. Democracy activists would, of course, like to believe that the names of many voters are missing from the voters' lists. While this may happen, it is a gigantic task to prune the rolls by dropping the names of voters who have died and ensure that there are no double entries, and it may leave the rolls with some inflation in numbers or registered voters. The point therefore is that we should not be over-critical of the turnout figures even when they are in the range of 60 per cent.

But let us also ask another question: does the citizen have the right to not vote? Does the citizen have the right not to be interested in politics? It is another story that in a country with a penchant for making every good thing from environment education to human rights education compulsory, some democratic enthusiasts would want to make voting compulsory!

The third question is: who are the non-voters? Do they have a social profile of their own? Data from the National Election Studies conducted by the CSDS in 2004 and 2009 suggest that increasingly, the non-voter in India does not have any particular social face. Of course, more women than men are non-voters; more illiterates than the educated are non-voters; young more than the middle-aged are likely to be non-voters; urban voters are more likely to be non-voters than the rural voters; depending upon the political context, minorities may be more likely to be non-voters, as in 2004. But in the case of all these factors, the gap is very narrow and between 2004 and 2009 it has further narrowed. Thus, perhaps it is good news for India's democracy that non-voters are not necessarily concentrated in any one social segment.

One systemic obstacle that stands out in turning potential voters into non-voters is the requirement of identity proof and perhaps its strict, unthinking implementation, something that definitely works against the poor, illiterate and the minorities. In 2004, for instance, among non-voters, over 40 per cent said they did not have the correct identity proof; this number came down to 16 per cent in 2009.

But the mother of all questions will be: does a vote matter? Unless we cynically believe that these 60, 70 and occasionally 80 per cent of our voters are misguided, that they are only ritually celebrating the one-day festivity called an election, or that they are bribed (not necessarily monetarily, but by turning them into "clients"), the message is loud and clear. The vote has come to mean an expression of democratic power, a means of connecting to the complex task of political governance and a starting point for making democracy a realisable goal.

But are any critics of our parliamentary democracy listening?

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