

SOCIAL BASIS

**Sanjay Kumar
Alistair Mcmillan**

Indian democracy has undergone a major transition in the last decade or so. Earlier, most of the political parties tended to be 'catch all' parties that got support from different sections of society in more or less even measure. The Congress represented the classic case of a catch-all party; its support has often been described as a rainbow, since the Congress voters were spread across the entire society. The rainbow was thicker at the edges and always included more than proportionate share of the votes of the minorities, dalits and adivasis. The level of support did vary from one group to another, but Congress' vote share used to be within 10 points of its average vote share. The same was reflected in the social profile of other parties. The arrival of Mandal and Mandir changed this, as India headed for a 'cleavage-based' politics. Political parties tended to draw much more votes from one section of society. Congress' rainbow coalition fell apart as different parties ran away with a slice each of that rainbow. Parties like the SP and the BSP are classic illustrations of this trend, for most of their vote comes from one caste group.

The BJP and the Congress have followed different strategies of political mobilisation to respond to this new situation. The BJP followed a path of sectional mobilisation. The core of the BJP's support came from the upper caste, well-off Hindus. Since that was not enough to produce a majority, the BJP looked for and found different communities to supplement its core support in different parts of the country. The profile of Congress' voters also underwent a change in this period. The Congress has now become a party that draws most of its support from the poor and socially disadvantaged groups. But the Congress faces a serious competition for votes of these groups from regional parties that directly appeal to these communities. The BJP has been more successful in consolidating its smaller catchment area, while the Congress has a larger but more fragmented group of potential voters. Lok Sabha election 2004 has not changed the basic social profile of voting for the leading parties. But the political alliances built by the Congress have allowed it to create a stronger alternative social coalition that can challenge the BJP.

The Congress and its allies have done slightly better among women voters, while the BJP and allies have done better among men. The NDA takes a lead over Congress alliance of 2 percentage points among men, but the Congress neutralises it with the help of an identical lead among women. In states like Haryana, Kerala and Delhi, the lead for the Congress alliance over the BJP and allies among women voters is extremely high, but in states like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu it is the BJP and its allies, who got more women votes. Traditionally the Left also does better among women and so do the RJD and AIADMK. This evidence of differential voting by men and women also confirms that at least a section of women take their voting decision on their own. The survey indicates that 49 percent women were not influenced in making their voting decision and they took their own decision.

Notwithstanding much discussion about voting pattern of different age groups, the fact remains that there is very little generational gap in India when it comes to voting and political opinions. In its early years of rise to power, the BJP used to get a higher proportion of support from the young voters, but that has evened out over the years. An old party like the Congress does a little better among the older voters, but that does not make a major difference to the party's profile.

What matters more in India is, of course, caste and class. Peoples' economic status makes a substantial difference to how they vote. The class profile for the Congress and its allies on the one hand and the NDA on the other presents a neat contrast. The BJP and most of its allies represent a confluence of social and economic privileges. The higher the economic status, the higher the vote for the BJP. The NDA thus secures 43 per cent votes among the 'upper middle class', a euphemism for the well-off in India. By the time we go to the very poor, the NDA's vote share falls to 31 per cent. The Congress alliance on the other hand does worst among the well-to-do and improves its vote share as we go down the economic hierarchy. It must be noted here that the national figures do not bring out the contrast very well, for the picture gets blurred in states where the Congress competes against the Left front. In these states, the Congress does better among the upper classes, while the Left picks up the votes of the poor and the very poor. In states that witness a direct Congress-BJP contest, the class profile of the two parties is extreme and opposite.

That leaves caste-community, supposedly the real stuff of voting in India. On the one end we have upper caste Hindus, 55 per cent of whom voted for the NDA this time. As one goes down

the Hindu caste order, the vote for the NDA declines. The OBCs voted for the NDA in the range of 40 to 50 per cent. This would make the BJP very happy, for the party has extended its support among the OBCs in the recent elections. The Congress trails the NDA by a huge margin among the upper castes. The lead is cut down among the peasant communities and the OBCs, but for the first time the Congress trails the BJP alliance among all the OBCs. 'Other' parties, representing regional formations like the SP and the JD (S) do well among the peasant communities.

As one goes beyond the caste Hindu order, the territory now belongs to the Congress. It establishes a huge lead among dalits by securing 35 per cent votes, while the NDA trails at 23 per cent. In states like Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Delhi and Andhra Pradesh, the Congress, dalit voters, voted for the Congress and its allies in big numbers. But in West Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh, the Congress has not been a popular choice among the dalit voters. In West Bengal the dalits voted for Left Front, in Assam, they voted for the BJP while in Uttar Pradesh, large number of dalits voted for the BSP. If the Congress does not manage to get the sort of lead here as the NDA gets among the upper caste, it is only because of the BSP that takes away nearly 30 per cent of the dalit vote across the country.

The Congress leads among the adivasis as well, but only by 11 points. In states like Maharashtra, Jharkhand Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Chatisgarh, Meghalaya and Rajasthan with sizeable Adivasi population, the Congress and its allies took lead over the BJP and allies. But large number of the Adivasis voted for the BJP and its allies in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Even in Gujarat, the BJP managed to get increase their popularity among the adivasi voters. This is one section that the BJP has consciously and successfully wooed in the recent years. While the NDA has lost votes all over the country and across all social segments, it has actually improved its votes among the adivasis by 5 percentage points. That is a warning to the Congress.

The Congress gets the highest share of votes among the Muslims as well. But at 47 per cent, this is much lower than what the party would have liked or hoped for. The biggest challenger of the Congress for the Muslim votes is of course the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Left in West Bengal. In Uttar Pradesh 62 percent Muslims voted for the Samajwadi party and its allies, the Rashtriya Lok Dal. Similarly, in West Bengal, 47 percent Muslim voters voted for the Left parties. The highest polarisation of the Muslim vote in favour of the Congress could be seen

in Delhi. In Delhi 94 percent Muslims voted for the Congress. Notwithstanding much hype about BJP making effort to secure Muslim votes, there is very little evidence to show any gains for the NDA. Its share of 11 per cent among the Muslims is actually about 4 point less than what the BJP and allies secured last time.

While this picture of social basis of political support shows considerable differences among political parties, it does not mean that election results are decided on the basis of caste-community. Take this election for instance. The NDA has lost about 5 per cent votes between 1999 and 2004. This has not happened because one social group has shifted en-bloc from NDA to Congress. Actually the NDA has lost around 4 percentage point votes across the board among all social groups that we have discussed, with the exception of adivasis. In other words, while traditional alignment of caste groups matter in politics, most often, the change in vote across two elections is decided by issues, opinions and voters' evaluation of governmental performance.