

## PARTICIPATION

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If the 'nineties witnessed the 'second democratic upsurge' – greater participation and more intense politicization of the disadvantaged social groups – the recent Lok Sabha elections indicate both a stabilization of that upsurge and its stagnation. We have arrived at a stage when expansion of participation in the procedural sense has been achieved; participatory norm has penetrated across social sections. At the same time, the expansion of the participatory norm has probably slowed down. This is evident both in the case of voter turn out and campaign related participation of the voters.

In this election, we had one of the lower voter turnout of recent times. The final figure of 58.3 per cent is 1.7 percentage points down as compared to the turnout in 1999. The turnout was still lower in the 1991 and the 1996 elections, held in a comparable season. In some of states, the turnout was actually much below the national average. Turnout in Gujarat, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh is below the fifty per cent mark. At the same time, it needs to be underlined that we are not looking at an alarming all round decline of interest and participation in political activity. The National Election Study series by the CSDS has been tracking respondents all over the country about different forms of political participation in the various elections. Our findings show that the participation in election related activities this time was marginally higher than in 1999. More people reported that they were interested in elections, went to attend election meetings, took part in election campaign and were visited by canvasser at home. These findings put in perspective much media hype about voters' apathy. Much of that refers to the indifference among the urban centers that have been recording lower turnout than in rural areas for the last two decades. This time it was the same story, except that the rural areas saw greater fall in turnout compared to 1999.

The National Election Study 2004 also offers some other evidence that would increase one's confidence in the system of elections. This Lok Sabha election saw the Electronic Voting Machines being used through the country for the first time. When asked which of the two methods they prefer, 90 per cent of those who had an opinion said they preferred the EVMs. That is a very strong endorsement of the new experiment. When asked to assess the fairness of the election process, only 11 per cent said that the elections were 'not at all fair'. At the same time those who were prepared to say that elections were fully fair did not exceed 38 per cent. Contrary to what one may expect, only 12 per cent say that malpractices like rigging have increased in their locality in their own memory.

The available figures show that the gap between the turnout of men and women continues at about the same level as before. While 62 per cent men turned out to vote, the figure was less than 54 per cent among women. In this respect, the elections in the 1990s had shown a tendency for the gap to come down, but that trend did not continue after the 1998 elections. In all the states of North East, the gap between the voter turn out among men and women was very low and in exceptional cases like Andamans, Lashadwep, Dadra- Nagar Haveli, women turn out was higher than voter turn out among men. In Himachal and Chandigarh, turn out figures are the same for men and women. Otherwise, in most of the states, there is a gap of about five to six percentage points in the turn out of men and women. Gujarat, Bihar, UP, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, are some of the states with a more than eight point gap in the turn out among men and women.

The gender gap was also evident in the candidatures. In states like Orissa, Kerala, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, there were a little more than average women candidates. The political parties that have been talking loudly of reservation for women in legislatures, did not bother to field more women candidates. The Congress led in the proportion of women candidates fielded: it had eleven per cent women candidates as against the BJP's eight per cent. Interestingly, the Samajwadi party also fielded over ten per cent women candidates. The left parties together had less than seven per cent women candidates.

The data from National Election Study 2004 gives us insights on caste-community wise levels of voters' turnout and political participation for which there is no official data. One contrast that emerges from this analysis is between upper castes and the Dalits. The upper castes are increasingly turning away from the electoral arena while more and more Dalits are firmly moving in this arena. In a sense, the battle is over who owns up the democratic process. Since the nineties, the Dalits and OBCs have invested more and more

stakes in the democratic process. Even in the case of interest in campaign and participation in the campaign, the Dalits and OBCs have a higher proportion of the interested and the active in comparison to the upper castes. This has some implication for the meaning of elections and also the meaning of election results. This also leads us to an ambivalence about the party electoral competition: while people hold elections and party competition as the game of the rich, they also see in it and in their right to vote, an opening-a possibility of penetrating this preserve of the rich. On the other hand, in spite of holding 'politics' as the preserve of the rich, people come to expect the same political arena to deliver for the ordinary and the poor.

In addition to the ambivalence, comes the stagnation of the democratic upsurge. This has two dimensions: on the one hand, the stagnation refers to slowing down of the expansion of the participatory norm even among the Dalits and the OBCs. On the other hand, there has not been a substantive expansion and control over the political process. The expansion stops at gestures and symbols, at procedures and tokens without deepening the democratic contestation.