

In an election for the masses the rich will be the winners

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Identity, not economic need, is the prime mover as the great democracy of India goes to the polls. The affluent can rest easy, says Praful Bidwai.

India's general election, which began last week, is as full of variety and dauntingly complicated as the country itself. The polling spreads over five phases lasting a month, with 714 million voters using more than 828,000 polling booths and 1.3m voting machines, which demand 6.1 million civilian and security personnel.

This time the scale of the enterprise isn't matched by its political content, with no grand issues at stake, no major ideological contentions, and no fault lines. But there is unprecedented horse-trading and political promiscuity. This is in contrast to the last election, five years ago, which became a referendum on the communal politics of the rightwing Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata party - most horrifically expressed in Gujarat's anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002 - and its claim that India was "shining". The BJP lost in 23 of 28 states.

In earlier elections too major issues were at stake - the self-assertion of previously voiceless underprivileged people, the decline of the Congress party, the rise of regional parties, and the mainstreaming of multiparty coalitions.

Today's electoral contention is multipolar, with two big blocs - the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance - and a still evolving Third Front comprising the left plus some motley regional formations. Then there are the as yet unaffiliated parties and individual entrepreneurs who would like to join a winning coalition when one emerges.

Policies and programmes aren't central to the campaign, which has been extraordinarily raucous and, in the first phase, violent. An example of abusive campaigning was the venomous attack on Muslims by Varun Gandhi, Nehru's great-grandson and the BJP's candidate in Uttar Pradesh. Gandhi threatened to chop up Muslims, and demanded that Muslim men be forcibly sterilised.

Logically, action against Gandhi should have come from India's autonomous election commission, which condemned his comments as pernicious and anti-democratic. But it cannot legally prevent Gandhi from contesting the election. It can only disqualify candidates after a court has sentenced them to two years or more. More than 3,000 people have been disqualified, but none during actual campaigning.

This institutional weakness is only one peculiarity of India's democratic system. Another is the central role of identities in the election bazaar - ethnic, caste, linguistic, regional and religious - and, less so, economic. The BJP wants to exploit politicised religious identities. Mayawati, the leader of the Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables), uses the caste as her fulcrum. Equally significant are other identities, including low and middle castes (OBCs - Other Backward Classes - in officialese), regional and sub-regional, tribes and clans.

In the Hindi-speaking “cow belt” caste finds expression in parties with strong OBC profiles. These parties spun off the Socialist movement, which itself coalesced in the Janata party, the Congress’s nemesis, in the 1970s. The south’s dominant parties are also based on regional identities. Relatively large umbrella parties like the Congress shelter disparate groups, without subsuming them under a caste-neutral category.

Strangely, identities based on economic status play a far smaller role. Party manifestos don’t directly address questions about acute poverty, lack of healthcare, education, sanitation or malnutrition - which affect half of India’s children. Most parties don’t even make pledges on redistribution, preferring palliatives such as free electricity, subsidised food, and even free TV sets.

Remarkably no party, not even on the left, demands that the rich be taxed adequately to generate revenue that can finance public services. The affluent in India pay among the world’s lowest tax rates, usually under 20%. Nor is there inheritance tax in this super-hierarchical society where privilege at birth guarantees lifelong status.

The result is a disjuncture between what has been called the natural centre of political gravity and its actual centre. The former lies firmly on the left of the spectrum, reflecting the reality of persistent deprivation, structurally rooted poverty, disgraceful income disparities, and lack of equitable growth. But, given the peculiarities of India’s political culture, the actual centre is diffuse and close to the centre-right.

Neither 150,000 farmers’ suicides over a decade nor even the loss of millions of jobs during the current economic slowdown have provoked a strong policy-oriented response from most parties. In part this is because free-market ideas remain fashionable within the elite, which may represent only a tenth of society, but is vastly influential in shaping policy discourse and media-led perceptions. It’s also because of India’s sheer size. Each directly elected MP represents almost 2 million people. Small groups have virtually no voice in policy-making. Working people are poorly organised and hence feebly represented.

So don’t expect this election to produce dramatic change - unless the BJP wins. If a Congress-led coalition or a regional parties-plus-left alliance wins, change will be modest.

P.S.

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