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Will caste be the future of Indian politics?

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April 04, 2009

First Published: 23:57 IST(4/4/2009)
Last Updated: 02:03 IST(5/4/2009)

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The Congress is in shock, and understandably so. It has just been told by two of its closest allies that its support isn't worth a handful of seats in the two largest states in India. Worse still for the Congress, the two Yadavs — canny operators both — have probably got it right. In the short term, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and Samajwadi Party stand to lose less from 'friendly' competition from Congress in their states than if they concede the few seats that the Congress were asking for.

Many would argue that the reason the Congress is seemingly fading to obscurity in Bihar and UP is that no major caste or religious group in the states identifies with it. Does this mean the Congress must reinvent itself to survive in the Hindi heartland? If so, then how? These strategic considerations are embedded in a larger question: is caste politics the future of Indian democracy?

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A campaign carried out by an NGO Saarthi, during the 2007 assembly elections, in 200 villages across 18 constituencies in Lalitpur, Sitapur and Bahraich districts of Uttar Pradesh, offers interesting insights into the nature of caste preferences. Volunteers from Saarthi spent a day talking to people in a series of meetings that culminated in a puppet show. Their message: "Vote on issues, not on caste".

Comparing electoral outcomes in these villages with other identical ones outside the campaign, a post-poll survey conducted by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies saw a remarkable pattern emerge. It showed that in general, 'caste-preferred' voting — people voting for a party that their caste was clearly associated with (SP for Other Backward Class, Bahujan Samaj Party for Scheduled Castes, Congress and BJP, the upper castes) — was widespread in these regions. Slightly less than half the villagers reported voting for their caste-preferred party. However, voters living in villages where the campaign was carried out were 10 percentage points less likely to report having voted for their caste-preferred party.

The official polling outcomes tallied by the UP Election Commission reveals even more striking impacts.

In the districts covered by the campaign, the BSP was the most popular party with a vote share of 40 per cent, followed by the SP with 30 per cent. The Congress lagged with an average vote share of five per cent.

The main beneficiaries of the campaign were the Congress and the SP. Both gained about 20 per cent more votes in the campaign villages. For the SP, the largest gain was in areas where the SC population was above the median 30 per cent share of the SC population in these districts, suggesting that it was the marginal SC voter who was persuaded to jump ship. In contrast, the Congress gained more or less equally in both high and low-SC areas.

How could a day of campaigning that could not have reached more than a quarter of each village's population have such massive effects? The answer has to be that for some fraction of the voters, caste loyalties aren't very strong. A major fraction voted according to caste, not because of any conviction but more by default. Saarthi's campaign was able to change how people vote by simply suggesting an alternative perspective on voting.

What is interesting is that the voters who were persuaded to stop and think actually thought of the Congress. After all, the Congress had no chance of winning any of these seats. It seems clear that despite its electoral irrelevance, the Congress still represents something to voters — perhaps the image of a different kind of politics, where caste and religion are not the primary drivers.

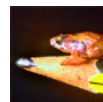
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If there is one thing that the Saarthi campaign tells us, it is that shifting voter preferences is not as unlikely as it would seem. In this context, it may be worth looking at the United States of America. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, the Democratic party in the northern states of the US had what it believed was a perfect "party machine": the loyalties of recent white immigrants, in return for recognition and financial help. By the 1900s, however, cracks began to appear as the increasingly better integrated immigrants became more confident they could survive without the party. Thus began the period of the rise (and fall) of the American Socialist Party, Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive movement and a range of reform movements that eventually decimated the Democratic machine.

It's too early to say when this process will begin in India or even where the impetus for it will come from. But some of the signs are already there. Mayawati's attempt to privilege class over caste in the 2007 UP elections might have been largely a ploy, but it did change the terms of the contest in the elections to come. If SC voters start to think of themselves primarily as poor voters, they will begin to ask questions that the BSP will find harder to answer. The Congress may be better off positioning itself for that day.

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