

Karnataka poll expenditure highest ever Rs.9,500 crores!

Just concluded Karnataka assembly poll was not only most keenly fought but also most expensive ever assembly poll in India. It was not only most visible mudslinging campaign but also money guzzler poll.

The Karnataka assembly poll involved in all an expenditure of Rupees. 9,500-10,500 crores, which is more than twice of what was spend in the previous assembly poll in 2013, according to an analysis by CMS. This does not involve the costs of the Prime Minister's campaign. (Any other estimate upwards could only be an exaggeration).

Earlier field studies of CMS (Centre for Media Studies) over twenty years had indicated that poll costs in Karnataka were usually higher than most state assembly polls. Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu, in that order, have been the highest poll time spenders in the country.

Karnataka assembly poll now indicates that the forthcoming Lok Sabha poll in 2019 is going to be a mind-boggling affair. At this rate, 2019 Lok Sabha poll expenditure estimate is Rupees 50,000-60,000 crore against 30,000 crores expenditure involved in 2014 Lok Sabha poll, according to Dr N Bhaskara Rao of CMS, who has been conducting poll studies over 30 years. (*Refer to "Lure of money in lieu of votes in Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections. The trend: 2007-2014" CMS Transparency 2014*)

This Karnataka assembly poll had increased the share of individual candidate's expenditure to 75 per cent of total poll costs involved. In the case of Lok Sabha poll, the candidate share however is expected to be 55-60 percent and the percent what political parties spend will increase to 29-30 percent, which is expected to be Rupees.12,000-20,000 crores in 2019. Half of what parties spend, or little over, is likely to be that of the ruling party.

The way the money was showcased and involved in Karnataka poll was as if to push the country for simultaneous poll to Lok Sabha and Assemblies. What is spent in a year by all State and Union Governments is on self publicity and propaganda in media, and is as much as what the national election costs?

While the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's weeklong whirlwind campaign had changed the character and direction of the campaign, Reddy-brothers of mining fame and the like candidates had changed voter expectations and the extent of expenditure.

A dangerous trend witnessed in this Karnataka poll, according to Dr Rao, is a shift in strategy to "fixing-the-poll", including 'note-for-NOT-vote', from that of "note-for-vote ". Now "dirty cash" has become a routine. Fixing scams and pre poll surveys of all kind were the accusation of each other parties to the extent of confirming that the country is trapped in "dirty politics" and "fake news" phenomena, much deeper than hither to realised.

The biggest story of this assembly election is about free and fairness of the poll. Seizer of a hundred crores could only be symbolical. The Election Commission came out helpless in this poll.

Earlier, some years ago, it was candidate and the manifesto which mattered more in a poll. Even leaders' charisma mattered. Not any more. They are no longer clinching poll factors, according to Dr Rao. This Karnataka estimate now is also based on field reports in the media, feedback of journalists and discussions with key functionaries at different levels in the field. This poll expenditure methodology is based on using our own past base data state-wise and taking into account the percent of voters paid in different blocks of assembly constituencies and the amount paid on average by different parties, and what was spent on key campaign activities by candidates and parties at different levels. These were tracked and assessed from discussions.

CMS has been conducting field studies on election expenditure at different level over the last 20 years. Earlier it conducted surveys in selected constituencies before and after voting. It was CMS, which coined "note-for-vote" and indicated first time wide spread practice State wise in its 2005 and 2007, benchmark field studies in 18 to 29 states with over 18000 voter samples. Since then it has been conducting studies on poll campaigns and expenditure, all over the country, including during the by-elections. (Refer to Dr N Bhaskara Rao's book "Poll Surveys in Media – An Indian Perspective", National Book Trust, 2012)