

## Media driven 2014 polls

Dr N Bhaskara Rao<sup>1</sup>

Are 2014 Lok Sabh poll media driven? Or is it more appropriate to say they were Modi driven all the way! Some may even say that it was Kejariwal driven, as it was he who figured far more in news channels, even more than Modi, in the first month of the poll campaign. Thereafter, coverage of Modi excelled as survey after survey came up with Modi leading the poll race. Going by media coverage there would be hardly a couple of other leaders who figured anywhere near nationally. But why was media repeatedly accused of giving "coverage of a wave". Or, why others said that a third front is "more in media". Social media too changed the complexion of 2014 campaign but more at macro level.

One thing is for sure. No country would have seen so much space and time of news media devoted for covering national elections over a period of almost 100 days! On the face of it, that should be good to say that our Indian democracy is vibrant. Such a coverage cannot be simply because India has too many round the clock news channels and so many news papers. As of end of May (until a new Government is ushered in) the news channels would have devoted between 55 and 75 percent of their time daily for poll coverage and news papers would have easily devoted 15 to 20 percent of their news space daily all these 100 days or more.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr N Bhaskara Rao is founder Chairman of CMS; E. [nbrao@cmsindia.org](mailto:nbrao@cmsindia.org) ; W. [www.cmsindia.org](http://www.cmsindia.org)

And then never before Indian news media covered so many "opinion surveys" during these 100 days or more as if raining cats. That too at a time when such surveys have come under increased questioning on many counts, including their reliability and even relevance. That many surveys, with the kind of samples claimed, would have meant an expenditure of over Rs.1500 million (who would have paid is a different issue). But then one could say that is hardly anything since the overall expenditure involved in this 2014 Lok Sabha election would be over Rs. 30,000 crores! In fact, never before in Indian elections so much was spent on media and focused too, in support a candidate nominated for Prime Minister position.

The question is what difference has all such efforts of media made to make this 2014 Lok Sabha election truly a game changer for deepening democracy and ensuring good governance in the country. Have they made any? What is expected of such an extensive preoccupation with elections of a free and independent media of the country operating under intense competition? The least that is expected is that news media function conscious of the fact that free and fair elections are as important as a free and independent media is.

Even more pertinent is that there is no evidence that coverage of concerns of voter is any better now than before. But, on the other, 2014 election witnessed unprecedented war of words with hate speeches of lowest level even more at highest level of party leaders, hence as prominently in the media, the news channels appear as if all out to take advantage. With no commensurate coverage of basic concerns of voters, or

substantive issues before the nation, or the propositions put forward in the party manifestos. Increased media space and hyping of such personalized controversies has been availed for TRP oriented coverage as before. And as if all news media are together in that in a jugal bandhi and are in a way accused (for manufacturing) the controversies. News channels have been criticized for hours of live coverage of extravagant road shows and filing nominations blatantly violating Election Commission's code. Of nearly a thousand "paid news" complaints on record during this poll, more than a quarter of them also received EC notice after verification. Would that make any difference? A public debate since after the 2009 poll has not!

There was hardly any diversity or sensitivity in the coverage despite competitive compulsion between channels. The nature of coverage remains punditry and preemptive as before. Now by many more degrees, as if each one believes more coverage is merrier. Of course, for themselves, not for voters or for the very electoral process. Despite being a media driven poll, campaign for 2014 polls hardly made much difference in making the poll qualitatively different and any more free and fair or in making voters selective. I am reminded of what L K Advani said about media soon after lifting of Emergency in 1977 – "when you are only asked to bend, many chose to crawl".

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(Words – 780)