

# Simply inconsequential

## Media had little impact on elections 2004

by N. Bhaskara Rao

**I**F the coverage of the US presidential election by the media there highlighted some pertinent lessons to be learnt, the 2004 Assembly and Lok Sabha polls provided several insights in the context of news coverage by the media. The 2004 polls had exposed the news media, survey agencies and political parties further. In this regard, five observations are worth making.

The first is the disconnect of news media. We already know about the divides of various kinds in the country. But the disconnect of the news media, the metro media more specifically, with the mainstream India has not been a concern, despite it being a source for some of the divides. Senior journalists like Nikhil Chakravarty and H K Dua did write candidly about this phenomenon a decade ago about the irrelevance of newspapers in the context of elections. Between the divide and the disconnect are the deep pockets that the media tend to cater to more. That is how media priorities and the popular wavelength are at such a variance. We are reminded of this at the end of every election.

Despite all that expansion, proliferation and the boom in the news media recently, its "influence" seems to be less today than it was some years ago. Even so their credibility. Even in the US, the presidential candidate endorsed by the prestigious news media has lost out as if such a coverage made no difference. How else can one explain, for example, that the voter turnout in India has been on the decline in the clusters where exposure to the news media in the country is the highest? Studies have indicated that this is because of the limited representative character and a definite decline in the social responsibility/concerns of the media. So, the disconnect of the news media is not only

on account of its limited reach, but, even more, their irrelevance. No wonder then why journalist organisations themselves maintain that today journalism as a profession has declined despite increased profits of media establishments. This shift in the paradigm needs to be understood in the larger context.

The second is the blatant bandwagoning tendency. This trend in the media, as we have seen in 2004, cannot be described as complacency about grassroots. It could be commerce and convenience.

The third is that the 2004 elections have brought out the inadequacies of poll surveys and the misleading use of them by the news media as well as by

remained the same despite significant changes in the politics of the country. Going off the mark is nothing unusual in the case of pre-poll surveys. But, not so with exit polls, particularly the way they were held in 1998 and 1999. And yet 2004 witnessed a further debacle and by the same psephologists — as if we have not learnt anything.

Researchers' subjectivity (implied in exit polls) about something in which they are not experts cannot be expected any better than from working journalists. Exit polls implied increased weightage to the subjectivity element. That is how they further eroded the very credibility and exposed such poll surveys. And then the craze for "larger"

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political parties — even in the US. This issue alone needs a wider debate. Earlier we were not sure of the effects of poll surveys, but the 2004 polls had brought out a "double-edged" character of poll surveys. This kind of one-upmanship, in the name of competition, even among research agencies and psephologists in 2004 was unprecedented. It was as if they operate in tandem. No wonder, why was there no plausible explanation for the "mislead" from neither of the agencies after April 2004? US networks, on the other hand, tried to give an explanation for their fiasco and restrained in their coverage to avoid a repeat in 2004.

Methodologies used by research agencies in this context, by and large,

and "largest" ever sample size had ensured *faux pas* of exit polls. Yet, there was hardly any practice of having serious interaction between editors/journalists and those who describe themselves as psephologists engaged in the number game, before giving out their "results".

TV channels have misused exit polls. Lack of sensitivity in the media itself about methodologies too has added to the "let-down" by surveys and psephologists.

By now everyone knows that poll surveys have become a commercial proposition, a very lucrative one, particularly for the one-man operations with no credentials. And yet their presence was prominent in the media. It has become

a "free for all" affair. Political parties have been using and viewing such poll-eve surveys as part of their election strategies. That is how there were so many plants in the media in so many different ways, some of them so blatantly. As a result, there is ambiguity on all the four core aspects of psephological exercises independence, objectivity, representativeness and in the very transparency of the exercise.

The fourth is as if all that was because of a "Jugalbandhi phenomenon". A week-to-week analysis of the coverage in the news media (newspapers and news channels) between January and end of April 2004, for example, brings out certain gang-up between key players as if it was a jugalbandhi.

The fifth observation is the politicians' pampering of the media (owners and journalists) and the media doing so of political bosses. Despite the fact that an incumbent had never come back to power on the media coverage basis, our political parties do not seem to learn lessons. The fear of boomerang too does not seem to bother our leaders. We have examples in India as well as in the US of parties loosing despite high-pitch media coverage and campaign. And, in 2004 we also had an example of a party impressively scoring without any coverage of its campaign in the media.

It is high time we have guidelines both for the news media to use poll surveys and for survey agencies to disclose their methodology and not exclude any findings implied in such surveys which are critical. The Election Commission should restrain exit polls and pre-poll surveys with disclosure norms and conditions. ■

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