

MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS

DR. N. BHASKARA RAO*

If by elections are meant democracy-at-work, media has been at its best in upholding the democratic process, more so in the just concluded elections to State Assemblies. At the end of an election, if Election Commission is the real winner, media cannot be behind. Going by extensive coverage in these just concluded polls, media deserve praise for sustaining and steering the poll campaign, reminding viewers of the issues and concerns of voters, and bringing to the fore virtues of candidates and leaders in so many different ways interactively and analytically by way of field based discussions and animated studio debates. Never before have elections in India been so transparent and live as in these polls. What more could media have done? And how differently could they have covered the poll process and party campaigns?

COVERAGE AS NEVER BEFORE

These elections being the first since the recent boom in the media, particularly the news channels, it is time to ponder. Those who are not interested in politics so much perhaps would say that television has more or less gone "berserk with polls". Some others would say it was yet another festival time for channels. Preoccupation of media with politics is well known, but not to the extent as in the last couple of months. Of course, the campaign for the polls in the four States was longest (4 to 5 months). That might have been bad for the parties; but it was good for the media, particularly for TV. Proliferation in the number of news channels, and competitiveness between them, has added to the scope of media coverage of the campaign. Overall, TV's role has been significant and as never before. In fact, some of the channels succeeded in bringing together contending leaders to an American style poll debate. Even in daily newspapers, there has been a

spurt in the last couple of years including in the four States that went to polls. In the last couple of weeks of the campaign, newspapers devoted as much as a quarter of their editorial space to coverage of elections in the four States. In the case of TV news channels, it was not less than one-third of time. For 24 hour TV news channels such occasions are an opportunity to "fill" time and make inroads for viewers as well as attract commercial revenue. Despite the late entry of Doordarshan News Channel, it

fared far better and with analysis, discussions and field reporting. In fact, Doordarshan was ahead of other channels in presenting the unfolding outcome on the counting day. It restrained itself from the competitive compulsion of going for poll eve surveys and was concerned more with serious analysis.

An "incumbent" party won only where exposure to TV was highest among the States that went to polls in 2003. For, TV is known more for "negative effects", particularly in the context of politics. This aspect of course has

nothing to do with individual channels. It is more to do with the very character of television. Unlike newspapers and radio, TV lends more for negative reporting, amusement and emotions. That is how it holds on to viewers.

That is why coverage was so extensive, to the extent of trivializing - perhaps because it was presumed that such coverage otherwise is boring or too serious to hold on to viewers. Channels covered a lot of filmi personalities, TV serial characters and their "dummies" often with filmi dialogues and even puppets. Between animated "notanki" type programmes and studio "jugalbandh" (with pollsters and experts), channels had extensive field reports. Repeat of visuals over and over within a day and in so many different ways amounted to more of the same.

Poll coverage on AIR had always been limited in terms of time but far more "informative", particularly its bridge-



* Founder Chairman of Centre for Media Studies (CMS)

programmes, linking capital cities. To the credit of TV channels it must however be said that their field coverage of campaigns had been much beyond the State capitals and urban centers. The earlier model of reading out on radio and TV by leaders of political parties as part of poll broadcasts on AIR and Doordarshan for over two decades, has made no difference to the scope of poll campaign. Nor have those broadcasts ever attracted listener with the increase in the number of contesting parties. They made no difference to political discourse. Eight to Nine hours in all was devoted by AIR and DD stations in each State that had gone for election based on votes polled in the previous election.

The range of coverage of polls by some newspapers, like *The Hindu* and *Dainik Bhaskar*, was far more. Perhaps because they did not sponsor pre-poll surveys and depended more on their own full time senior staff reporters. Whereas some daily newspapers, even big ones, which sponsored pre poll surveys, used TV channels as source for their coverage of the poll campaign. The *Hindu* was the only daily which gave post-poll surveys the importance they deserve in understanding the poll process.

The Congress Government in Delhi released a sleek quickie film much before the poll campaign. It was formally released through cinema halls of Delhi and TV channels as a reminder of "achievements". BJP's ads in Delhi, Rajasthan and MP were more direct and personality centred. The Election Commission's relaxation on advertisements in the media come in for parties. The BJP's advertisements were three times more than that of Congress party's. The BJP in Delhi and Rajasthan, for example, had 10 or more large size advertisements in newspapers. In Delhi two of those ads. debunked unfavourable poll surveys and two featured favourable surveys. Pramod Mahajan was candid when he credited the advertising campaign in Rajasthan for turning the table. He said that "things started working for the party" only after the advertising. When the Swatantra party was a key contender several years ago, they relied on such advertisements and it was a wash out. Media campaign without booth level follow up does not make a difference.

Media did not go beyond "hard news". The Supreme

Court had made it mandatory for contesting candidates to file affidavits on their education, income and criminal record. Independent "Election Watch" organizations analyzed these affidavits. But these aspects were hardly reported. Overall, what difference did media make in enlightening the voters in mobilizing higher voter turnout, in making the campaign centred around issues of concern, rather than on caste, community and on individuals and emotions?.

MORE MEDIA, LESS VOTER TURNOUT

Voter turnout increased only marginally in Delhi, where media reach is maximum. But the turnout increased far more in Chattisgarh where media reaches hardly one-third of voters. There is no evidence that hype on polls in the media has made much difference in voter-turn out in Delhi. In fact, compared to 1980s when there was hardly any television coverage, voter turnout in 2003 was lower. The joke in a post poll analysis by a NDTV comical (Gustafi Mafi.) was that BJP lost in Delhi because of extensive TV and it won in the other three States because there was not much TV viewership!. In fact, since 1998 voter turn out increased more in MP, Rajasthan and Chattisgarh than in Delhi. That is, media made the difference, rather facilitated the poll outcome although differently. Double-edged potential of TV was obvious in this cam-

paign. So also boomerang phenomena. In Chattisgarh Aakash Channel was supposed to have devoted itself to boost the chances of Ajit Jogi. In fact, whenever there was blatant over use of electronic media by an incumbent, that party did not return to power.

Nevertheless, no one would say staff reports in the media in 2003 was one-sided in their coverage of polls as newspapers were accused three decades ago, when there were no pre-poll surveys and newspapers were criticized for their bias and staff reports often as one sided or off the mark coverage of polls. Nevertheless such reports were often based on poll surveys. In 2003 the media was accused mostly for their (dependence on) coverage of pre-poll and exit polls. Pre-poll surveys and exit polls were taken up by news media as major part of their coverage of polls. In fact, such surveys have become revenue-earners for TV channels. For, that is how pre-poll surveys and

Nevertheless, no one would say staff reports in the media in 2003 was one-sided in their coverage of polls as newspapers were accused three decades ago, when there were no pre-poll surveys and newspapers were criticized for their bias and staff reports often as one sided or off the mark coverage of polls. Nevertheless such reports were often based on poll surveys. In 2003 the media was accused mostly for their (dependence on) coverage of pre-poll and exit polls.

exit polls were hyped and stretched on and on with animated discussions.

The number of pre-poll surveys published in the media is increasing, both in the case of Assembly and Lok Sabha. So also the number of exit polls. This is despite wide variation in the findings and going off the mark the actual result. Nevertheless, poll surveys have come to stay and will continue to be relied by news media.

They have become part of our electoral process and of our media. Hence we need to understand better their scope, relevance and also limitations. But going by the experience of 2003 one need to wonder how much sensitivity is there in the media as to the very character of poll surveys.

DO POLL SURVEYS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Over the years CMS, based on its post-poll surveys, had maintained that pre-poll surveys in the media do influence poll process. Based on the insights from conducting election studies for over 25 years, I had written extensively that pre-poll surveys and even exit polls (when conducted prior to completion of the poll process), do make difference to the poll process. Realizing this kind of scenario, as early as in 1987, I wrote on Rights & Wrongs of pre-poll surveys in Media Monitor (defunct) of India Today and suggested the need for Dos & Don'ts for poll -eve surveys being covered in the media. I also advocated that editors in media should be the first ones to understand far better as to pros & cons of such surveys.

With media reach far more today than it was a decade ago, there is room for more concern. Depending upon the demographics of the electorate and at what stage of a poll campaign the findings of a pre-poll survey gets covered in the news media and how prominently, three distinct influences of pre-poll surveys could be traced. The same could be said about coverage of a poll campaign by media. These are:

- 1) "Bandwagon effect", where the tendency on the part of undecided voters is to go along with the party/candidate projected in the surveys as having a better chance of winning.

- 2) "Underdog phenomena", where the tendency, particularly on the part of disloyal voters, is to sympathize with the candidate projected to lose in the survey.
- 3) "Complacency factor", where leaders and cadres become complacent with multiple pre-poll surveys projecting pretty much similar outcome with safe margins, as if underwriting the victory of a party or candidate.

The higher the percentage of undecided voters or keen the contests, the more likely the implications of pre-poll surveys. The least pre-poll surveys in the media do is to enthuse cadres and influence fence sitters. There is wonder why pre-poll surveys have become another instrument in the armory of political parties. Editors should be the first to discriminate against pre-poll surveys which are part of party campaigns.

Since every time there is an election, new survey agencies crop up and the onus rests with the news media to verify the credentials before sponsoring or covering surveys - even as advertisements. For, the intention of such surveys is to influence voters for a bandwagon effect. The media must be a lot more concerned about this aspect. In the four States that went to polls there was evidence for all the three types of influence of poll surveys to

In the four States that went to polls there was evidence for all the three types of influence of poll surveys to some extent or other - Bandwagoning in MP, complacency in Rajasthan and "underdog" phenomena of over doing in Chattisgarh.

some extent or other - bandwagoning in MP, complacency in Rajasthan and "underdog" phenomena of over doing in Chattisgarh.

Academically speaking, poll surveys in the media are expected to improve the content and quality of an election campaign and the very process itself. With over a dozen pre-poll surveys one wonders to what extent this happened in the four States that went to polls and in which direction. This is something media need to view more seriously and professionally, going beyond competitive and commercial concerns. Since every one agreed that it was the last one or two weeks that made the difference in two of the four states, should that be attributed to media coverage or poll management ?. No party can afford to win a poll without strategic use of media. But that should not mean "media management" by political parties. ■