

A Heady Mix: Gujarati and Hindu Pride

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The results of the December 2007 elections in Gujarat show that the declining role of tribe and caste identities and increasing cultural uniformity due to extensive urbanisation helped Narendra Modi hammer home the 'Gujarati asmita' (Gujarati identity) slogan and successfully counter the Congress' charge of communalism.

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In the Gujarat assembly elections of December 2007, of the total 182 seats the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 117 – 10 less than it did in the 2002 elections. It got a clear mandate but lost the two-thirds majority it had won in 2002. The Congress and its ally the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) together won 62 seats, a gain of 11 compared to the previous elections. The other parties have the remaining three seats. The opposition with 65 seats has thus gained a marginal advantage as far as the assembly proceedings are concerned. However, this advantage can be effective if the ruling party does not resort to the tactic of reducing the number of assembly sessions as well as their duration. This tactic hurts not only the opposition but also the MLAs of the ruling party and is on the whole bad for parliamentary democracy.

Approximately 60 per cent of the electorate voted and the BJP got around 49 per cent of the total votes polled. Chief minister Narendra Modi's admirers often hail him as 'hriday samrat' (emperor of hearts) of the people of Gujarat, while he claims to speak for five and a half crore Gujaratis. But this is merely rhetoric.

The share of votes for the BJP has remained more or less the same as in 2002

(around 49 per cent), while that of the Congress and NCP together reduced by about 2 per cent (from about 41 to 39 per cent). This should be a cause of worry for the Congress and the NCP with parliamentary elections round the corner.

Erosion of Traditional Vote Banks

The distribution of seats between the two major parties in the various geographical and social segments of Gujarat shows that in this election all the traditional vote banks, except the Muslims, became more or less irrelevant. Of the five sub-regions, namely, Kutch, Saurashtra, north Gujarat, central Gujarat, and south Gujarat, there is no single overwhelming pattern of voting across four sub-regions. The only exception was central Gujarat, where the Congress performed better than in the other sub-regions. It is noteworthy, however, that this sub-region was for long a stronghold of the Congress, became a part of the BJP wave in 2002, and is now back with the Congress. There is also no definite evidence of a difference in the voting pattern between the rural and urban areas; neither the adivasis nor the dalits have remained overwhelmingly with the Congress; and the two dominant castes, the Leuva Patels (an upper caste) and Kolis (a middle caste) who were expected to vote overwhelmingly for the Congress according to media predictions did not do so. This trend requires intensive research as it indicates changing ground realities.

At least one important reason for the declining role of tribe and caste identities

as seen in these elections is the cultural uniformity that has emerged among castes/tribes due to the processes of industrialisation, commercialisation, urbanisation, sanskritisation and modernisation during the last five or six decades. The idea of 'Gujaratni asmita' (Gujarat's identity), which was confined for long to the upper strata of society, has now spread among almost all sections of society. Secondly, almost every ethnic group is now highly differentiated economically, and the different economic strata within it seem to be behaving differently in the political arena. Thirdly, due to the tendency of rival parties to sponsor candidates belonging to the same ethnic group, the primordial group gets divided politically. The widespread belief that every ethnic group votes en bloc is facile. As a recent book [Shah 2007] on electoral behaviour in the 1960s-1970s has shown, the members of a caste even in a village did not always vote en bloc then and the practice declined further in subsequent decades. The influence of primordial loyalties was

contextual. There were also signs of the younger generation in the family voting against the wishes of the older generation, a factor that seems to have become more significant in recent elections.

On the whole, the wider issues as projected by political parties in their campaigns played a greater role in the electoral behaviour this time. Clearly, the urban population took the lead in this direction. Its proportion in Gujarat is fast approaching 50 per cent, and towns and cities, large and small, are evenly distributed all over the state, unlike some other states where a large proportion of urban population is concentrated in one metropolis. In the past, door-to-door canvassing used to take place in towns, even in the middle class neighbourhoods, but now this is nearly defunct except in slums. The modern electronic as well as print media have instead played a more influential role in shaping electoral behaviour than in the past. It seems the Congress relied more on the expected behaviour of the traditional vote banks. While the BJP

did not neglect these vote banks, it made additional efforts to mobilise public opinion across all strata of society in its favour, using the modern media of mass communication cleverly.

Election Campaigns

The style of communication played a much bigger role in the campaigns in this election than in the past. The star campaigners of the Congress were mainly from outside Gujarat: Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh, Rahul Gandhi, Digvijay Singh, Kapil Sibal, and several others. They addressed large rallies, but none of them could communicate in the Gujarati language. Moreover, Sonia Gandhi, the prime campaigner of the Congress, spoke with the help of written notes; this was noticed by the audience, and Narendra Modi made fun of it in his speeches repeatedly. On the other hand, the BJP had practically only one star campaigner, Modi himself. He spoke Gujarati using the choicest colloquial words and phrases, modulation of voice, and appropriate body language. He cultivated



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his outward appearance: favouring half-sleeve kurtas, and sporting turbans characteristic of the caste, tribe and sub-region of the area where he was campaigning. He also engaged his audience in dialogues and his response to Sonia Gandhi's well known and controversial remark, 'maut ke saudagar' (merchants of death), was in the form of such a dialogue. He also campaigned vigorously throughout the length and breadth of Gujarat. The only Gujarati campaigner on the Congress side who could match him to some extent in style was Shankersinh Vaghela, the central minister for textiles, but he addressed only a small number of rallies, mainly in north and central Gujarat. Modi's style appealed enormously to the masses. In fact, it had become a part of his substance, often called 'Moditva' (Modism).

Modi constantly used the slogans, 'Gujaratni asmita' (Gujarat's identity) and 'garavi Gujarat' (glorious Gujarat), which have been a part of Gujarati literature for more than a century, and are now systematically built into the BJP's political discourse. There have been several confrontations between Gujarat and the centre in the post-independence period, e.g. during the 'maha Gujarat' (greater Gujarat) movement, and during Chimanbhai Patel's second term as chief minister of Gujarat. Now, since the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government came to power at the centre, the BJP government in Gujarat has had confrontations with it too. There is a popular feeling that there is no important Gujarati leader at the centre to protect its interests, and Modi exploited this feeling. He also constantly alleged that the centre neglected Gujarat. He projected himself as the person who spoke for Gujarat and stood up for its people. He harped on the Congress Party's alleged failure to give Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel the recognition he deserved for his crucial role in national politics, implying that this was the Nehru family's game. The BJP in turn glorified Modi as 'chhote sardar' (junior sardar). He repeatedly termed the criticisms against him and his government as attacks on the people of Gujarat – an emotional ploy that earned him rich dividends.

The constant condemnation of Modi and his government after the 2002 communal

riots by the media, social activists, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), rival politicians and a number of foreigners too has hurt the Gujarati pride. Modi pumped up this pride by a series of steps: honouring the freedom fighter Shyamji Krishna Verma, naming universities after Gujarati literary and philosophical stalwarts like Narmad and Hemchandra, taking credit for raising the Sardar Sarovar dam height, reviving the Saraswati and Sarbarmati rivers with the waters from the Narmada, and celebrating the Gujarati festivals of Uttarayan and Navaratri in a big way.

Development versus Hindutva

It is widely speculated that if Sonia Gandhi had not made the remark, "maut ke saudagar" (merchants of death) describing those at the helm of the Gujarat government, and if Digvijay Singh had not called them, "Hindu terrorists", Modi would have highlighted the development record of his government rather than communal issues in his campaign. No one can be sure. It is hard to believe, however, that Modi and the BJP would have given up the Hindutva agenda in their campaign.

Modi projected himself as the saviour of the Hindus and subtly laced his speeches with anti-Muslim sentiment, especially the ones addressed to the urban middle classes. He engaged the Ram Setu issue effectively. He also won over the sadhus and sants, and was often photographed and seen in their company. It was widely reported in the media then that the refusal of the top leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal to campaign for the BJP would adversely affect the BJP's prospects. However, this was a deceptive assumption, as most of the local workers of the Sangh parivar continued to work for the victory of the BJP candidates. In any case, the BJP had more effective local organisation of workers in comparison to the Congress. Even well-meaning people, sympathetic to the Congress, complained that the Congress leaders approached the electorate only at the time of elections and forgot it subsequently.

Although there is a common perception that Modi and his government played a big role in the communal riots of 2002, it is important to recall that these riots did

not affect all parts of Gujarat equally, and some not at all [Lobo and Das 2006]. It was therefore easy for Modi to counter allegations against him in these areas. Moreover, neither riots nor terrorist attacks recurred after 2002, and Modi took credit for this. For all these reasons, by and large, the electorate did not take kindly to the allegation made by the secularists in general and the Congress in particular that the entire state of Gujarat was prone to communal violence; in fact the allegation proved to be counterproductive for the Congress.

The Congress itself did not emphasise the development issue forcefully. Its campaigners rarely mentioned the many new initiatives its government at the centre took for economic and social development of the country, including Gujarat. They also did not emphasise the economic development that had taken place during the Congress rule in earlier decades, and the enterprise of the people of Gujarat themselves in agriculture, industry and trade irrespective of the character of the government. On the other hand, Gujarat's public perceived Modi as a strong and efficient administrator who took up many successful developmental initiatives.

Modi projected his persona as an ascetic who works long hours for the public cause. By and large he has an incorruptible image. He also projected himself as one who delivers results; his propaganda was backed by performance which gained him credibility. He repeatedly said, "*Vikas thayo hoy to mane vote aapso, nahi to na aapso*" (if there has been development, then only give me votes, otherwise do not).

Modi cultivated different segments of Gujarati society differently. He engaged the youth in celebrations and festivities, and appointed them to posts in universities and other institutions. For instance, he appointed young persons as vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors, and as members of the university senates. For women, he initiated several schemes, such as 'kanya kelavni' (girl's education) and 'beti bachao' (save the daughter). He told the women, "Write a postcard to your brother, who is at Gandhinagar, about any of your grievances". For the rural masses, he arranged 'khedut yatra' (farmers' pilgrimage) to highlight the schemes for supply of

electricity and dam water. For the benefit of fishermen, he initiated the 'sagar-khedu yojana' (seafarer scheme). He gave industrialists tax benefits and abolished octroi which pleased the middle class.

Implications

The political developments in Gujarat during the last seven years and the nature of the election campaign and its results indicate certain trends for the future. First of all, the slogan of Gujarati pride is likely to become more potent than that of Hindu pride in the coming years, and the two together promise a heady and deadly mix. A leader, widely perceived as having an authoritarian streak and his party have become the arbiter of both Gujarati and

Hindu pride, and any criticism of their policies and actions is likely to be termed anti-Gujarat as well as anti-Hindu. This does not augur well for democracy in Gujarat.

The BJP's victory is likely to give a further boost to some of its members in numerous local institutions to behave in a brazenly authoritarian manner, protected by the ministers and other high level politicians. In this context, the social character of the BJP cadres needs to be studied critically and their behaviour watched carefully.

The election results indicate a continuing danger for civil society institutions such as universities, colleges, research institutes, cooperatives and NGOs, and for the world of art, literature and science. In particular, all the universities, except a

few in the private sector, have sharply declined due to continuous interference from the government and the party in the crucial decision-making bodies such as the syndicate and the senate. The space for freedom of thought and dissent has already shrunk and is likely to shrink further, which is likely to hamper creativity essential in any art, literature or science. Well wishers of Gujarat will have to be constantly vigilant of the behaviour of the men and women governing the state.

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