

Poll surveys vitiate democratic fundamentals, don't they?



Ever increasing expenditure on election campaigns and increased number of poll surveys are eroding the very fundamentals of free, fair and inclusive claims of our electoral system. And yet we are hardly making efforts to reverse the trend, as if we do not even recognise the symptoms of decline in democratic roots, says **N. Bhaskara Rao**

I owe an apology to the nation for making poll surveys an “instrument” though they were initiated more as an academic exercise, and for being a fountainhead for pollsters in the country over the decades. It is now 45 years since poll surveys have become news media’s staple. During this period, we had seen some 10 Lok Sabha polls and over 100 Assembly polls.

In the 2018 round of assembly polls, nearly Rs 100 crore was used to conduct field surveys. Now, in this round of 2019 Lok Sabha poll, I estimate nearly Rs.500 crore being spent for all kind of surveys, including by parties for candidate selection and by candidates for wooing votes. This time, political parties and news media have taken to poll surveys a year before the schedule was notified on Sunday, March 10.

What have we gained from the poll surveys? Can anyone give one benefit that poll surveys have provided voters or to politics or to governance or in bettering people’s representation or in increasing transparency in the electoral process? We cannot even say that we are electing better candidates today than 25 years ago! Have our parties become more reflective of the concerns of people and more representative since taking to poll surveys? Has our electorate become wiser and more selective in their voting?

Who then have benefited from poll surveys? For sure, the news media, particularly news channels and, of course, the pollsters and poll agencies are the beneficiaries. But primarily in monetary terms. Have they bettered their credibility? Have news channels expanded viewership base beyond TRP claims. Indeed, pollsters, as psephologists, have become privileged and been pampered by political leaders.

Poll surveys could be blamed for many accumulated ills in our electoral politics. Thanks to poll surveys, election costs have been on a constant increase and freebies have no limits. Poll surveys have made a level playing field even more difficult for the entry of new talent. And have made polls and political parties more manipulative in the name of strategy.

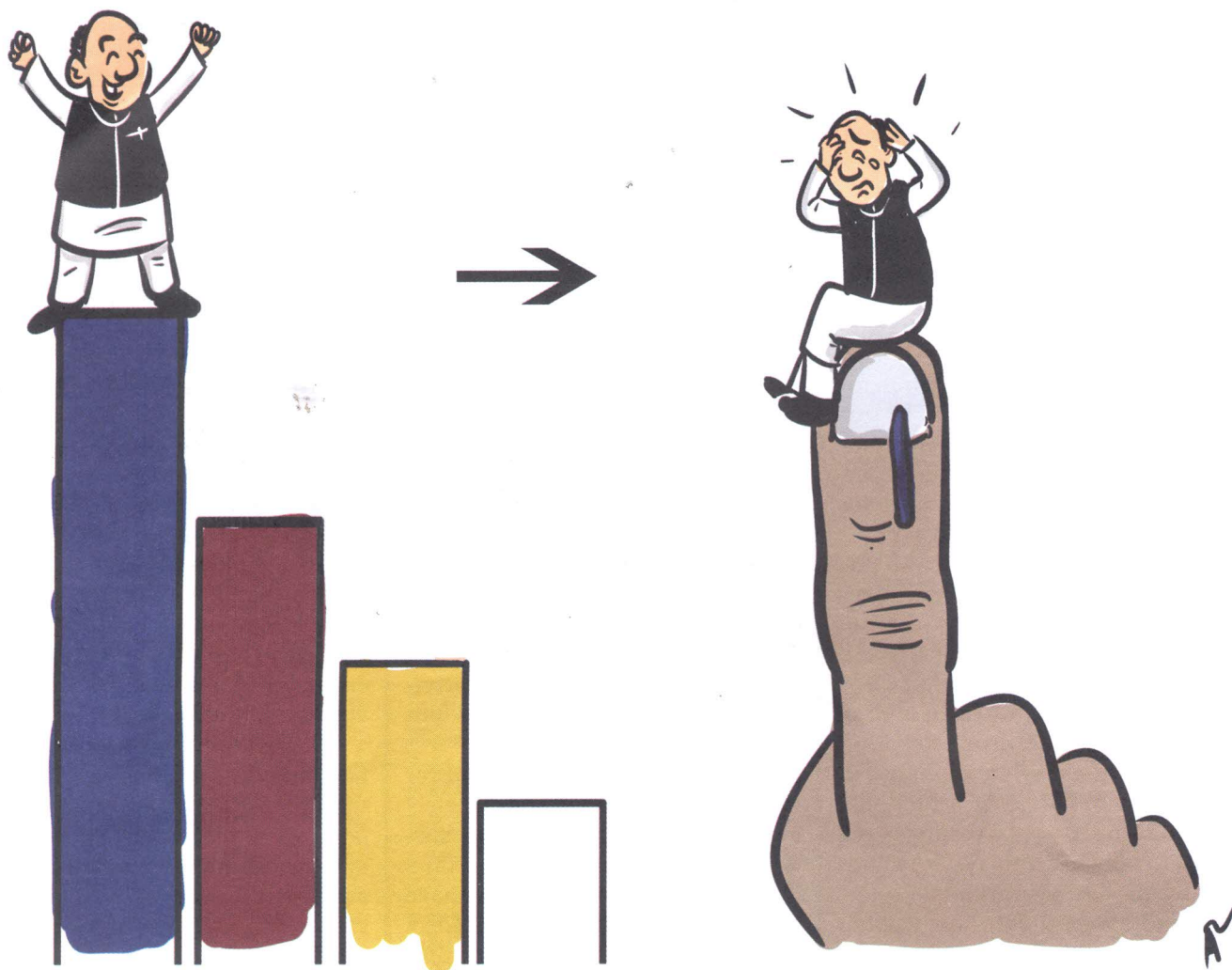
Poll surveys, largely, are no longer viewed as independent or objective. They can be accused of deepening divides between people, regions and communities in India. It is too obvious that surveys have spread the ‘note-for-vote’ phenomena. They have promoted public relations and image building phenomena out of proportion to ground reality. All this has caused distrust in the electoral process and outcome. As a result, today’s voter does not view elections as a serious means for better governance, or to get representative

government or getting corruption-free public services.

A poll survey brings together a research agency, a politician or party and a news outlet. They often treat voters as gullible without revealing full details and identities or any conflict of interest aspect. False notions are sometimes spread – that sample size is more critical; more the size, the more reliable the findings.

Poll surveys are deceptive. One need not do a field survey to come up with such vague trends as has been the case of late. Our electoral system can never become truly free and fair the way poll surveys are covered in our news media. Free and fair polls are as important as free media is. They are two sides of same coin. In the past, some poll surveys were close to the final result more by chance, not because of any particular methodology of the pollster.

Do poll surveys influence voting? Based on field surveys on shift in voting preference, I had indicated more than two decades ago that poll surveys do influence voting marginally or otherwise. But then, the way TV channels take up coverage based on poll surveys, one cannot say their influence is same today. There are instances of news media coverage of surveys swinging cadres and potential candidates from one party to another.



In 2010, I quoted in my book, *Poll Surveys in Media – An Indian Perspective*, what George Gallup's close associate said two decades ago about the role of poll surveys in vitiating democracy. My book described how poll surveys were being commissioned and managed and analysed in India. News media are as much a party as the political parties are for the way poll surveys are reported and hyped. This may be because control of news media today is slipping to political leaders, directly or indirectly.

Has poll surveys led to an internalisation of systemic research in governance in India? There is no evi-

dence of such a large field research force engaged in poll surveys contributing to research potential of the country or our public policies becoming citizen-centric. I can say that more research and analysis had gone into our public policies and governance 30 years ago than in the last 20 years. Independent research has declined in our public discourse and public policies. But motivated and supportive social and political research has been on rise.

I did not speak out on poll surveys for some years. I thought I should break my silence now. My book was reprinted by National Book Trust in 2012 with a hope that there would be

a public debate on poll surveys and that better sense would prevail. But there is no evidence of that and we continue with deceptivity, despite high stakes. ■

(The writer is founder, Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi, and the author of The TRP Trick, Unleashing Power of News Channels – An Indian Perspective. He has pioneered applied social research, including electoral studies, in India over the past 50 years.)