

How 'notes for votes' dampen democracy

A set of studies points to the growing extent of the corrupt practice in Indian elections — and shows that where parties are cadre-based and have high loyalty levels, its incidence is lower than elsewhere.

N. Bhaskara Rao

Has "notes for votes" become a phenomenon to reckon with in election campaigns, or is it only an isolated practice confined to a few places? The Lok Sabha itself witnessed a shocking notes-for-votes episode in 2008, and has it now become a poll practice? In the last fortnight of March 2009 there were more than a dozen instances of television news channels showing cash in large quantities being transported or distributed by political leaders in the context of the elections.

Earlier, the distribution of currency notes for votes used to happen after the election campaign ended officially. Now, even four weeks ahead of the poll date it is in evidence.

Cash comes into play in three distinct phases: it is given to party leaders by candidates seeking a nomination; it is given to cadres and competitors on the eve of the filing of nominations; and it is distributed to voters on poll-eve.

There has been no empirical study on this, however. The Centre for Media Studies (CMS) undertook such a study at three different points over the last couple of years. In 2007, as part of a study on corruption involving below poverty line (BPL) families, CMS made a study on the percentage of voters who had ever received cash in return for votes. It covered 23,000 BPL households in 29 States. Realising that the malaise was not confined to the poor, in 2008 CMS did a study among 18,000 voters in 19 States. In a third round, CMS did an exploratory study in December 2008 in eight intensely fought Assembly byelections in Kar-

Going by these studies it appears that while in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar muscle power is more at work, in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu money power is unleashed. Interestingly, it was in these southern States that political parties had more poll surveys conducted and more TV channels had devoted time to cover poll campaigns, including instances of notes-for-votes and other offers in kind.

The CMS study brought out the fact that the notes-for-votes phenomenon had spread across all sections irrespective of age group, income level and educational level, in urban and rural settings. Where the parties are relatively more cadre-based and party loyalties are higher, as in the case of Left-ruled States, the percentage of voters involved in notes-for-votes acts is lower than elsewhere.

A much higher percentage of voters in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh acknowledged receiving cash as an inducement "in the last 10 years" than in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. The amount involved in these northern States was much less than in the southern States. The 2009 Assembly-cum-Lok Sabha elections in Andhra Pradesh could well be the most "expensive" ever in India: nearly half the voters, it is expected, will be given Rs. 500 or more per vote.

CMS is now planning to study the influence and the effect of the notes-for-votes phenomenon. The two are different. Influence relates to how voters are influenced in their voting. A preliminary enquiry indicates three types of influence. First, voters vote for the candidate on behalf of whom they are given money. Second, although they receive money,

abstain from voting because they are given money to restrain some otherwise loyal voters of a particular party or candidate. Although there is evidence of all three types of influence having been deployed, CMS is yet to quantify the extent of each because the system of notes-for-votes works in different ways from constituency to constituency and election to election.

Indeed, notes-for-votes is the "mother of all corruption" because it is here that the vicious cycle starts. The voter does not realise that for every Rs. 10 that comes from a candidate as a lure for votes, he or she ends up paying five to 10 times more annually as bribe to avail of basic services that a citizen is entitled to from government service-providers. Thus, notes-for-votes has a direct effect on governance.

Interestingly, there is no evidence of instances of notes-for-votes having had any impact on voter turnout. Perhaps this is because cash is distributed not on the basis of any demands for it being made by voters but it is done by candidates owing to local competition in a given contest. Also, more and more candidates are new or unfamiliar faces, or those who live far from the constituency, or those who have made their money rather quickly, or those who have unaccounted money. No other factor can explain this phenomenon of "competitive politics." The effects of the cash-for-votes phenomenon include depriving the true representatives of the people of any chance to get themselves elected on the basis of a contest with a level playing field.

These enquiries, together with reports carried by some news channels, indicate that the incidence of notes-for-votes has in fact

Election Commission has taken certain initiatives recently. It has been appointing "expenditure observers" to track and validate expenditure on various kinds of campaign activity. It has made it obligatory for candidates to file expenditure statements a couple of times during the campaign period. The provision that candidates must file these statements within a specified period after an election has existed for some time. But there is no evidence that this has made any difference. The Commission, for the first time, has disqualified a number of candidates who did not file their expenditure statements for the earlier election from filing their nominations in 2009. The Commission confiscated more than Rs. 40 crore in cash that was being transported for distribution during the Karnataka Assembly elections in 2008. Beyond that, its actions have not been known to be deterrents. Even the police are on alert now. More than all this, it is the media's vigilance that has been exposing the practice. But, then, some experts would say the more such news reports appear on TV channels, the more is the spread of the practice, with the amounts involved only growing and voter expectations growing as well.

The best bet is for voters themselves to reject the lure. They need to understand the linkage between notes-for-votes and the bribes citizens end up paying to get what they are entitled to get from the government and from their elected representatives. Civil society groups should step up their efforts at the local level against voters being lured. And, the Election Commission should come up with more deterrent measures. Only then will the poll process become truly free and fair.

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Going by these studies it appears that while in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar muscle power is more at work, in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu money power is unleashed. Interestingly, it was in these southern States that political parties had more poll surveys conducted and more TV channels had devoted time to cover poll campaigns, including instances of notes-for-votes and other of-fers in kind.

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abstain from voting because they are given money to restrain some otherwise loyal voters of a particular party or candidate. Although there is evidence of all three types of influence having been deployed, CMS is yet to quantify the extent of each because the system of notes-for-votes works in different ways from constituency to constituency and election to election.

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These enquiries, together with reports carried by some news channels, indicate that election-related favours have inflated poll expenditure in India by five times or more since 2004.

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(Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao is Chairman, Centre for Media Studies, and a pioneer in the field of election studies in India.)