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Maya ignores media

Political parties spent Rs 700 crore

by N. Bhaskara Rao

THE BSP's Mayawati has demonstrated in the landmark Assembly UP poll how unconventional wisdom could sway voters in the days of hi-tech expensive campaigns. In the process certain myths like the media, money and muscle power determine a poll outcome were underscored.

While the other parties in UP were busy for a media hype directly and indirectly, the BSP was busy at the grassroots level and, in fact, kept itself away from the news media. Mayawati did not care what other contenders were saying on television and in newspapers. She also did not waste money on advertisements and visibility in the news media.

Rather she had gone for a localised and personalised campaign infusing confidence in cadres and motivating workers and appealing those who were not known as BSP voters. That is how the BSP was able to mobilise its voters when the overall turnout in all the seven phases was all-time low.

Unlike others, Mayawati had no populist promises and she had no poll manifesto either to worry about media publicity.

She kept the media at bay because she had no problem of disconnect with different sections of people. In fact, she showed how instant rapport could be built with those who were not part of her base until then.

She has also not wasted her time on commissioning pre-poll surveys or exit polls and had not gone for so many animated discussions on surveys. All this enabled her to have a proactive campaign from the very outset. Mayawati seems to have realised early enough the folly of getting into the riddles of news media, their weightage and priorities. She understood the con-

cerns of voters better irrespective of their community.

While the BJP, the SP and the Congress were caught in controversies of their own making during the campaign, the BSP was busy in voter mobilisation work.

Of about Rs.700 crore spent (as per the CMS estimate) by political parties and their candidates in the just-concluded UP Assembly poll, the BSP's share was the minimum - around 10 per cent. The SP, on the other hand, spent four times more. The BJP and the Congress spent about 35 per cent.

This is despite the Election Commission's initiatives to restrain expendi-

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ture. Mayawati had hardly spent on media publicity, including television commercials, poll surveys and extravagant shows, which together constitute nearly 40 per cent of all poll campaign expenditure. Nor did the BSP spend to procure votes.

She also has not depended on outside leaders to campaign for her candidates as the other parties did. BSP cadres and leaders concentrated on their own pockets and constituencies.

In UP the campaign expenditure was higher than ever before mostly because of the staggered seven-phase poll. In fact, what political parties had spent in this poll in UP was as much as what the government's expenditure was for the general election in the country. No wonder the Chief Elec-

tion Commissioner was disappointed over the "failure to curb the excessive use of money and eliminate money power".

As to "muscle power" in the poll campaign, although the BSP too had its share in deploying those having pending criminal cases as its candidates, a majority of its candidates were "new". One MLA with a criminal background has been made a minister. The composition of the BSP candidates was such that it helped depolarise voters on communal lines. Thirtysix per cent of all SP candidates had a criminal background, according to the UP Election Watch.

In fact, in the final phase 58 per cent of the SP candidates had such a background against 32 per cent of the BSP candidates. In fact, no party in this poll could keep away from those having a criminal background.

A couple of those candidates did their campaign from the jail, making threatening calls. A prominent SP candidate used a cell phone from the jail in the neighbouring state to address public meetings in the constituency (he has won!).

The UP Election Watch did bring out promptly for every round of the poll the criminal background of candidates. Vulnerability mapping and constituency-specific measures taken by the Election Commission to minimise voter intimidation and proxy voting have helped in ensuring a relatively violence-free election despite the longest-ever poll battle.

Nevertheless, in the ultimate analysis if every party follows the course as the BSP did in the UP poll, the electoral process in India would be far more dispassionate and democratic. Elections would be much less caste and communal based and much less money power driven and more concerned about the basic issues of people.

The writer is the founder Chairman of the Centre for Media Studies.