

CASH-FOR-VOTES: AN INSIDIOUS POLL TREND

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

In this general election, the Election Commission has confiscated cash, gold and silver, liquor, drugs and other items worth 3,205 crore, according to data published by the constitutional body on April 27, before the fourth phase in the seven phase-election began. At this rate, we can expect more than twice this amount to be confiscated by the time the election comes to an end. This amount is much more than what was confiscated by the EC during the 2014 Lok Sabha election. What is confiscated is likely to be less than 5% of what is being spent by all the candidates and parties in this election. The total expenditure of this election is estimated to be about 50,000 crore, which is the highest amount for any election in the world.

Yet, no political party or leader so far has expressed concern about this trend and its threat to the fundamentals of our republic. Instead, candidates continue accusing each other of giving more cash for votes. I had pointed out based on field studies in 2009-2014 that the more the media coverage and the higher the number of crorepati candidates in the contest, the more the money that is expected by the voters. This is exactly what is happening today.

Cash for votes — Tamil Nadu's best kept open secret

We should be concerned even more that the trend is no longer limited to being predominant in the southern States (other than Kerala), but has now become significant elsewhere too. According to the EC, if gold, drugs, liquor and cash are taken together, the total seizure is highest in Tamil Nadu by a wide margin, followed by Gujarat, Delhi, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh. On confiscated cash alone, Tamil Nadu again tops the list, followed by Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal and Maharashtra. Uttar Pradesh too is in the cash-for-votes race.

Two large-scale baseline studies of the Centre for Media Studies in 2005 and 2007 in 20-plus States and select studies since then in every round of elections reliably indicate that cash distribution occurred and may be on the rise irrespective of the socio-economic status of the recipients and the area in which they reside (urban or rural). Unless the demand side is addressed too, no policy initiative is likely to make a difference.

In this unusual paradigm how can we restore true representative democracy? One option is for the news media to play a positive and proactive role, which would require media houses to extricate themselves from conflicts of interest. The same could be said of corporates, which have become a major source of funding formally, yet there is also likely to be a strong informal nexus. Unless a course correction is made soon, the 2019 Lok Sabha polls will go down as a watershed election for the wrong reasons.

The writer is the author of the recent book ‘Sustainable Good Governance, Development and Democracy’

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The Modi regime has embarked on a game of brinkmanship with Pakistan for just an advantage on the electoral stage

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