

Conscience and Cross-Voting in the Presidential Polls in India

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Much as anticipated, the UPA nominee Pratibha Patil has made it to Raisina Hill. She polled nearly twice the number of votes as her NDA rival Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. In addition to the votes of the UPA constituents and the Left, the support of Mayawati also proved decisive.

The race was not closely fought and the winner was a foregone conclusion; yet this Presidential election, seen as a forerunner of the next Parliamentary polls in 2009, generated the heat and dust of a high-pitched political contest. For now, the Presidential poll outcome has served to highlight the disarray in the NDA and the isolation of the BJP. Having dishonestly projected Shekhawat (a life-long BJP and RSS leader) as an “independent” candidate, the BJP has found that it is in fact their own MLAs - in Gujarat, MP, Chhattisgarh who have proved to be “independent” of their party!

The ironies of “conscience” in our parliamentary and public life also played out dramatically in this election. The CPI(M) vouched for the secular conscience of the Congress nominee. The BJP leadership appealed to voters to heed the “voice of their conscience” to vote across party lines. And wonder of wonders, it was the communal conscience of that Shiv Sena, the closest ideological ally of the BJP in the NDA, which was moved to support the secular candidate selected from among various Congress possibles by the CPI-CPI(M)! Some BJP legislators in Madhya Pradesh apparently chose to display their particular brand of conscience and defiance by writing ‘Om’ and ‘Jai Shri Ram’ across the ballots to invalidate them.

Reacting to the UNPA’s announcement of a decision to abstain, the BJP attempted to get the EC to exercise its authority. While the Election Commission recognized the democratic right to abstain, it declared that parties were not allowed to issue whips on such how their members to vote. According to the EC, in Presidential elections or elections to the Rajya Sabha, legislators get a certain licence: voting behaviour that in the House would be castigated and penalised as “floor-crossing” and horse-trading would now become a lofty exercise of conscience. Parties that issued a whip to abstain would risk inviting penalties for attempting “undue influence” on the election process. Former Chief Election Commissioner GVG Krishna Murthy put the same point across more baldly. He proclaimed that it was a “duty” to vote and for a party to call upon its members to abstain amounted to a “threat”. In other words, to invoke inner-party democracy and discipline is to go against the “duty” so dear to the ruling class: the duty of bending democracy to fit the two-party paradigm. Smaller players must either join the two teams or quit the game.

Before long we are going to have another UPA-Left consensus candidate for the Vice President’s office, symbolising the growing political convergence between the two tiers of the ruling dispensation (the UPA and its supporters ‘from without’). A woman in the Rashtrapati Bhavan and a backward Muslim in the Vice President’s chair will now be projected and celebrated as empowerment of the weaker and marginalized sections of society. The people of India, however, know better. Lived experience of the past 60 years have convinced them that such superficial symbols are poor substitutes for the real struggle for empowerment.

P.S.

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