

Elections and the challenge of rational expectations

India's miseries today are a sign of big changes in society not being recognised by politicians and policymakers



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The science of political arithmetic that tries to understand society through measurable and static parameters has had little success. Unfortunately, human behaviour is guided not by reason and logic but by whims and prejudices. Consequently, the process of finding remedies to the various problems confronting societies is more closely related to our upbringing, temper and training rather than strict connections between objects and events.

However, application of physics to mass human behaviour is worth considering, provided we recognise the scope for error and incorrect application. A fundamental fact is that society will change with changes in needs, appetite, passion and desires as reflected in the change in its collective behaviour. It is now possible with the use of technology, software, "big data" mining and analytics to make reasonable predictions about society in the future despite the uncertainty created by the exercise of individual free will.

The analysis of the causes of change in society by applying methods borrowed from physical sciences has been around for a long time. This effort has moved from the catastrophe theory of the 1970s (simplistically a theory of tipping points of large systems into disequilibrium or disarray), chaos theory of the 1980s (that sought to emphasise the link between seemingly unrelated variables in determining unanticipated "shocks" to large systems like weather) to the currently in fashion "complexity" theory (ideal for India) that seeks to understand how order and stability in society arise from the interactions of many agents by applying a few simple hypotheses. This can be applied to fundamental questions with which social scientists try to grapple: how do people in a free society make decisions, cast votes, make alliances and com-



THE OTHER COALITION People line up to cast their votes outside a polling station in Rangareddy district in Andhra Pradesh. Society would do well to accept that government alone cannot steer them clear of all problems, nor can they solve them without help of the population at the grass-roots level. Governance has to be a symbiotic two-way process

panies? What is the basis of network of social and business contacts? What drives politics of conflict and co-operation and enjoyment?

However, to expect physical science to provide a comprehensive theory of the functioning of society or provide pat answers to complex social and political problems would be a trifle absurd. Nevertheless, once we recognise its limitations, properly applied physical science can provide valuable insight in areas such as social, economic and civil planning, leading to better decision-making and a better understanding of the electorate by the politicians. It could also bring rationality in people's expectations from society and its governance or control.

The precise methodology that physical sciences offer to analyse societies is far too complex to be compressed into this article. Suffice it to say that it enables us to take a "systems" approach

to the understanding of social behaviour and that of its cohorts. We can start with some simple assumptions and definitions. Society is just a name for a collection of individuals connected by interaction and governed by laws, institutions and social structures. However, this collection is not homogeneous and can be sliced into sections. Each section of society normally has expectations of a "Utopia". Utopias come in many forms — socialist, communist, egalitarian, religious, Victorian, *laissez faire*, dictatorial, democratic, paternal/maternal and so on. A utopian society is a mirage because one man's utopia is another's dystopia — humankind has too much diversity of nature to fit one mould. So, we need to temper expectations of various sections of society to come up with a vision of society acceptable to all.

India's miseries today are a symptom of big changes in society not being

recognised by its most visible representatives, politicians and policymakers. To name a few, the rise of a prosperous middle class, demographic change, education, the demise of old boy networks that were a throwback to colonial times, exposure to multiple media, the penetration of the telecom and more slowly the internet, economics rapidly trumping dogmas like caste-affiliations for a large section of the under-privileged population, human empowerment, and so on. Coupled with this is a clamour for good governance, transparency and accountability. The most vigorous and ambitious segments of society will produce the new parliamentarians and the movers and shakers of society. These individuals will no longer feel obliged to cater to the remnants of the Raj and the corridors of power created through cosy self-reinforcing relationships and religious groups.

India is a democracy in transition. Because of its diversity and active press it is bound to be very noisy. The opinion polls seem to be pointing to a change in

aspirations, opinions, needs and composition of society. But the polls have a fundamental limitation since the results they throw up are largely quantitative. It would be great if our pollsters could simultaneously get the people polled to ascribe the reasons for the opinions expressed by them. On the one hand, some of our politicians stick to the dogmas and others recognise the new paradigm, but to be safe are straddling the old and the new. Only the elections will tell us who was right. But then, election results are not also enough to "inform" politicians about what specifically voters expected from them when they voted.

Thus, while we will definitely have a coalition government, its functioning would be much better if everybody understands what, in terms of specific expectations and aspirations, got them elected in the first place. On the other hand, voters should understand that the age of the paternalistic government with a handout for every need is over. Society would do well to accept that government alone, however good, cannot steer them clear of all problems, nor can they solve them without help of the population at the grass-roots level. Today, governance has to be a symbiotic two-way process. To take liberties with John Kennedy's famous quote, "ask not what your government can do for you (also) ask what you can do for your government."

History is normally a good source of learning. The combatants in the English Civil War had few clear ideological distinctions. Roundheads claimed allegiance to King and Parliament, so did the Royalists who fought under the King's banner. Both sides were Anglican. There were aristocrats in the parliamentary ranks and common folks among the cavaliers.

The irony of the English Civil War is that those slaughtering each other might have found little to dispute had they wielded words (logic and reason) instead of swords (whims, prejudices and vested interests). Our elections seem to have some of the same problems. Shave off the rhetoric and posturing and you get what the common people (the real *aam aadmi*, not the party) crave — stability, fair laws equitably applied, accountability and a decent life for all.

History has shown that an enlightened democracy is the best of flawed options to manage the society available to us. We, therefore, need to ensure that after elections the government works towards the real goals that benefit the country and society. Over time, the two main political combinations will move to a common understanding as to what society desires but with different brand identities and focus.

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