

Poor Psephology

Himanshu Roy writes :

Psephology is a science of accurate electoral prediction. Unfortunately, in India, in recent decades, the psephologists have transformed it into sorcery. The Karnataka election may be cited as the latest case in point about which only the NDTV's forecast was relatively accurate. The others floundered miserably. Another recent case in point is of Gujarat Assembly election. The prediction of the team of CSDS- CNN-IBN-Dainik Bhaskar which predicted 92-100 seats for the BJP or of the NDTV which predicted 90- 110 seats for it and the actual seats (117) received by the party reflect this point. The UP election is the third case . The exit polls conducted by the CNN-IBN-CSDS in its final prediction for UP Assembly published on 9 May in the newspapers forecasts 152-168 seats for the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), 99-111 seats for the Samajwadi Party (SP), 80- 90 seats for the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and 25-35 seats for the Congress. Yogendra Yadav and Sanjay Kumar then wrote that this vote share (29%) for the BSP is not enough to secure an absolute majority for the BSP. The NDTV predicted 111-127 seats for the BSP, 113-123 seats for the SP, 108-118 seats for the BJP and 35-45 seats for the Congress. Star News predicted 140 seats for the BSP, 89 seats for the SP, and 110 seats for the BJP as per its report published in the newspaper on 4th May. In all the three surveys, their general prediction was for hung assembly with wide variation of seats to be won by each three major parties. The result turned out to be an utter failure for them. There was no hung assembly. The BSP won the majority seats (208) and formed the government at its own. The SP won 97 seats, the BJP won 51 seats and the Congress won 21 seats.

Social scientists working on electoral politics and party system can predict the assembly results in states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, etc., even without psephology where particular political parties/ coalitions form the government after every assembly elections. For, there are 15 states where there exists bi- party system; and there are 9 states where there are bi-coalitional systems.

For one thing there has been a series of such failures in their forecasts in different elections. In the Punjab election the CNN + IBN + HT exit poll published on 14th Feb predicted 50-60 seats each for the Akali Dal–BJP combine and for the Congress. The result declared on 28th Feb was 67 and 44 respectively for the two different political formations. In Utrakhand, the NDTV exit poll published in the newspapers on 22nd Feb predicted 27-35 seats each for the Congress and BJP. The result was 35 seats for the BJP and 21 seats for the Congress. Here it may be pointed out that the numbers of assembly seats either in Punjab or in Utrakhand are small, 117 and 70 respectively, with a settled tradition of alternative party government after every assembly election.

In 2004 parliamentary election NDTV'S forecast published in newspapers on 20th April predicted 260-280 seats for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and 165-180 seats for the Congress alliance. The final exit poll conducted by the NDTV, for example published on 11th May in the newspapers predicted 230-250

seats for the BJP and 190-205 seats for the Congress. Three days later, on 14th May, the newspapers declared the election result as 188 seats for the NDA and 219 seats for the Congress and commented that pollsters are once again wide off the mark.

Now the question is why their forecasts and exit polls have gone haywire of late and along with it the trust of the people in the psephologists. The accuracy of electoral predictions of early 1980s or early 1990s no longer exists. Neither does exist the trust in the psephology. There may be many answers. It may be in the decline of their professionalism or in the lack of their commitment to their work. It may be also due to their lack of political impartiality that might have coloured their questionnaire, survey and conclusions. More, it might be intentional to manufacture an opinion in favour of a party which does not exist at the grassroots level. Or, it might be due to a desire to create a government of their interests. □□□