VOTE BUYING AND SOCIAL IMAGINATION: A CASE STUDY OF RK NAGAR BY-ELECTION, TAMILNADU

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ABSTRACT

Vote buying has become a biggest problem in conducting free and fair elections in India. The threats they impose undermine the very nature of Indian democracy. What is the reason behind such immoral incidents in politics? The paper tries to understand these events through a case study of recently concluded RK Nagar by-poll, which saw the rise of TTV Dinakaran, the nephew of Sasikala Natarajan as a potent force in Tamilnadu politics. The paper tries to analyse the discourses of the people regarding 'money' and 'politics' dictated by their socio- political context and tries to understand the meaning they attach to 'money' and 'politics' and through that analysis, the paper tries to locate these corrupt practises in the lack of 'Social imagination' by its people.

KEYWORDS: *Social Imagination, Political culture, vote buying, RK Nagar, cash for votes, Charismatic authority.*

INTRODUCTION

Indian political behaviour is marred by incidents like cash for votes, political clienteles and incidents of poll rigging etc. Every election in India witness huge incidents of getting cash for votes. In fact these are very famous in states like Tamilnadu where freebies and cash are the main determinants of electoral victory for many decades (Devasahayam & Suresh, 2011). Anirban Mitra and others, through their empirical research of consumption behaviour have shown that people's consumption of day to day goods take a significant increase after the election campaigning, which they cite as a proof of bribing voters with cash during elections (Mitra, et al, 2017). These political behaviour of the people is not sporadic or one time exception. These are internalised, structural long time behaviour and hence could be a case of corrupt political culture of its people. This hence qualifies as a question of political culture, defined as the ideas, beliefs and orientations of people towards their country's polity (Almond 1956).

THREE AUTHORITIES AND SOCIAL IMAGINATION

German Sociologist Max Weber gave a famous concept of three types of authorities which continues to impress all generations of political scientists and sociologists alike. His classification of authorities into traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal rational authority have been a benchmark in political attitude literature, which demarcates at what basis a common man submits his obedience to an institution (Eisenstadt 1968. Max Weber believed that a good administration should be an administration built upon rational and scientific procedures and a person should always give his obedience to an authority only after seeing its legitimacy.

In India, most people select their leaders not based on their evaluation of the leaders' positives and negatives but based on their perceived charisma. The interface between the social being and the individuality is expressed in his/her ability to 'socially imagine' his/her positions and possibilities. Hence, the persons who can effectively 'socially imagine' their social positions, social roles and future individual possibilities of growth and self actualisation would prefer a legal-rational authority and persons who can't do it, will always look for a messiah or an external force to engage them properly in the society. Lack of proper education, lack of qualified social capital, lack of cultural capital and lack of power to overcome unfavourable circumstances encountered, makes people less 'socially imaginable'. Such an average individual is trapped between the dynamics of unfavourable circumstances he/she faces and is subordinated to the arbitrary will of the powerful. The requirement of these average individuals do not go beyond basic means of power like food, shelter, good roads, drinking water etc as their ability to socially imagine is completely stripped off due to their social conditions.

CASE STUDY: RK NAGAR BY POLL

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To study the link between social imagination and vote buying, the recently concluded by-election for Tamilnadu's EX-Chief Minister's constituency RK Nagar was selected. Because, the RK-Nagar by-poll that took place in Tamilnadu in December 2017 was historic in many respects. The result remains as a testimony not just of the first ever victory of an independent candidate in TN's by-poll history (Janarthanan, 2017) , but also for the power of money in overriding any ethics in people's political behaviour. Not long ago, the same RK Nagar people wanted to settle score with Sasikala and her family for their alleged involvement in the demise of former Chief Minister, J.Jayalalithaa fondly called as 'Amma' (Deccan Chronicle, 2017) and within a year, one of her close associates is elected to power from the same constituency. The victory of TTV Dinakaran, the nephew of Sasikala Natarajan, can neither be hailed as phenomenal nor be dismissed as an aberration. Hence studying the case of RK nagar would throw some light on stages set behind vote buying.

METHODOLOGY

To understand 'why' people voted for 'money' in RK nagar 'politics', the plane of enquiry is placed on the ontology of 'money' and 'politics'. Hence the discourses of the people of RK nagar about politics and money found in the media contents is analysed to understand the meanings and importance these people attach to these things. To understand why they attach such meanings, the social setup of RK Nagar through its historical roots is studied and through that the resultant mentality of an average resident of RK Nagar is analysed.

THE MARGINAL SOCIETY IN RK NAGAR

The assembly constituency of RK Nagar consists of areas like Tondaiarpet, Washermanpet, Korrukupet, some regions of Kodungaiyur and Royapuram, which form the bulk of North Madras or Old Madras. The region hosts at least $1/5^{th}$ of the total slums of Chennai city. The development of the slum culture in North Madras has its roots in British India. British founded the city of Madras in 1639 after buying few villages from Damarla Venkatapati Nayak. Tondaiarpet was one of the earliest villages annexed to the British 'Madrassapatnam' along with Purasawalkam and Egmore, jointly called as 'three old towns' in 1693 (Narasiah, 2008). The region during that time was inhabited predominantly by Telugu speaking communities like Telugu Brahmins, Beri chetty, Komutti chetti, Kalwai chetty, and Pariahs (untouchable caste) of Tamilnadu etc. Subsequently official settlements like Washermanpet, specially designated

for cloth washers and Royapuram, specially designated for boatmen were established by the British (Heitzman, 2008). The growth of the city of Madras as a commercial and industrial hub meant that these regions of Old Madras were flooded by people from all the parts of Tamilnadu and gave it a heterogeneous slum character. Nadars (a caste group) in huge numbers migrated to Washermanpet during early years of 20th century and through their mercantile skills made it a wholesale grain and grocery centre of the city and made it their settlement in few decades (Hardgrave(jr), 1969). These slums of Old Madras served as the hosts to large scale migration that took place towards Chennai city. Hence the social groups in today's Tondaiarpet, Washermanpet regions are completely different from what they were in early 20th or 19th century. As a result, the traditional control of the society based on culture, religion and ethics is completely replaced by modern 'slum mode of social control' through goondaism and rowdyism. The caste wars of 18th century in Tondaiarpet, especially between left hand and right hand castes, are replaced by 'Gang wars' and 'fan wars' (fights between the fans of famous Tamil film stars is common in Tamilnadu slums) in 21st century. The frequent discourse of an average teen in these areas would be regarding cinema or about opposite gender or about street fights. The social consciousness developed as a resident of RK Nagar will hugely contradict the consciousness they develop through Mass media and newly developed social media, which an average RK Nagar resident fails to distinguish. These inherent contradictions in their social life accompanied with lack of social solidarity based on tradition, religious ethics and culture reduces an average RK Nagar resident to a position akin to Robert Park's 'Marginal Man'.

THE RISE OF TTV DINKARAN FROM VILLEN TO A HERO

RK Nagar has traditionally been an AIADMK fort since its inception. The fact that out of the eleven previous elections in this constituency, AIADMK has lost only three times explains the strong presence of its cadres and vote base in RK Nagar. Whether people voted for the charisma of MG Ramachandran and Amma in the previous elections or traded their votes for just money or such a charisma has been manipulated and re-established now and then through distribution of cash and other benefits among these rent-seeking voters is a debate in itself.

Do the people of RK Nagar belong to the category of 'socially unimaginative' individuals? The answer to the question could be empirically validated through the analysis of the discourses of 'politics' and 'money' of these people.

In a video survey taken by a media house, we get to hear the opinions of the people of RK Nagar about 'politics' and their choice of candidates. The video was published on March 30, 2017 when campaigning for the first by-poll scheduled at April 12 was at full swing (RED PIX, 2017). At that time AIADMK was split into two factions; one headed by O Panneerselvam and the other headed by TTV Dinakaran and the Government was in the hands of TTV faction. Also, it was already alleged that TTV was bribing the voters and giving them Rs 4000 per vote. In this scenario, the video was published which gave us the opportunity to peek into the people's mindset. Out of the 63 persons who were interviewed, almost all the three major parties had equal support. Since, we are not sure of the sampling technique, this cannot be considered as the exact depiction of the situation. But, what interests us is the discourse of politics the people gave the interviewer. None of the people who reasoned their choice of candidates thought beyond freebies and boundaries of their locality. It is pertinent here to recollect that, at that time Sasikala and Dinakaran were alleged with numerous allegations of land Mafia, Business Mafia, structural corruption etc (Ray, 2017) (Madhav, 2016) (savukku, 2014). But none was expressed by even Sasikala haters! An old lady expressed anger over Sasikala for her alleged involvement in the demise of Amma, but was not even aware of these Mafias which would create broader impact in their social life than killing of Amma! Another video published by another popular media house (Behindwoods, 2017) few days before the second by-poll, at a time when Dinakaran was alleged of distributing Rs 6000 - Rs 10000 based on locality (India Today, 2017) (Behindwoods Tv, 2017) , had many interesting discourses of people justifying the act of getting cash to vote. A teenage girl even justifies the act by saying that since she pays tax she is liable to receive cash for votes! Now, in this video, we can see a definite shift in the mindset of an average voter in RK Nagar. The anger that was present six months back was conspicuously absent in this video and few people even admired the personality of TTV, a testimony of what money can do to our justification. It also reminds us that mob generally act and then justify their act rather the other way round. A new hero of the masses is born out of the ashes of 'Money' like a phoenix, like a Robinhood, who robs many, but, helps me!

THE QUESTION OF MORALITY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

The act of getting cash for vote should not be considered as an immoral act of the people. In fact people

are moral enough to vote for the party which gave them money. Actually, these acts are so normalised in these societies as part of its political culture such that no one finds it immoral or abnormal. Actually, the problem lies in the way in which politics is organised in the country. Politicians, either in power or without it, do not let people understand their real social position and allow them to use politics as a process to improve such position. Rather they try to mobilise people on caste, religious, linguistic and other sectarian lines and make people believe this is the role of politics. Indian democracy is cursed from the very day of its inception with this 'erroneous political culture'. An average citizen hence being embroiled in these dogmas doesn't go beyond this spectrum of politics which has his/her quest for basic needs like food, shelter etc in one side and bigger needs of caste, linguistic or religious supremacy at the other side! In the videos referred above the RK nagar people discuss about electing their choice of politician to power, to rule them. What, we as citizen does not understand is that the 'essence of democracy' is not electing someone else to power, but 'empowering' ourselves through electing someone of us. But, to be fair to the people, the public behaviour of our elected representatives reassert the times of kingships and people are always subjected to the arbitrary will of the politicians and are practically left with no mechanisms to counter it. Hence, the discourse they develop out of this is akin to either parochial or subject political culture, but not of participant political culture which would lead to true democracy.

Another point is that since corruption is so widespread in every aspect of our society, people cannot distinguish between a corrupt practise or otherwise. The opposition sloganeer 'corruption-corruption-corruption' at anything the government does and the ruling party repeat the service when they are voted out of power. This sloganeering of corruption at anything and everything has become counterproductive as people have started to justify their 'cash for vote' by saying that since all alternatives are corrupt politicians, why can't we elect a corrupt but still benevolent 'cash' giving politician.

CONCLUSION

The people of RK nagar belongs to that category of socially unimaginative individuals. As long as the people of the country are 'socially unimaginative', the problems of corruption, nepotism and cash for votes cannot be wiped off from the society. The social-economical-political processes should be restructured in the country to make people understand their position, their roles in the society, their

inter-connectedness as social beings, their avenues of growth and progress, importance of self-actualisation etc, in short, to foster 'social imagination'. If the people are 'socially unimaginative', money becomes their messiah to solve all the problems of their society, as the society for them is their kith and kin and their immediate locality. In such circumstances, the incidents like 'cash for vote', corruption, nepotism will repeat eternally. Hence, the key to create a robust democratic environment lies in creating good 'socially imaginative' individuals. The people should understand the importance of economic activity, importance of political activity, the broader impact of every social and economic activity they do, etc. They should have basic knowledge of today's world dynamics and should know their exact location and importance in such an ever changing world. As more and more people become 'socially imaginative', the politics of the society will automatically rearrange itself based on legal- rational authority and it will pave the way for realising true democracy.

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