



Policies & Perspectives



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

Challenges of the India-Bharat Divide

Rajesh Singh, Visiting Fellow, VIF

23 January 2018

Many narratives have emerged in the wake of the Gujarat Assembly election result, but the most compelling among them has been that of the India-Bharat divide. It is not a new phenomenon though, given that the urban-rural differentiation talk has been part of the nation's political vocabulary for decades, and especially more so since independence when political parties have had to confront the challenge of satiating the two sections, often viewed as generally having conflicting or at least vastly different priorities and grievances. In ordinary circumstances, the endeavour to meet the twin needs ought not to have been any different from the other challenges governance faces. But with disparities between the two growing and working against the rural class, the need for a recalibration keeps getting resurrected. And electoral results which reflect this desire are a sure way of rattling the political class into some sort of action.

Let's consider the Gujarat example to understand how India and Bharat voted. Of the 89 seats that went to polls in the first phase of the Assembly election last December, 70 per cent belonged to the rural category. More than 60 per cent of the 93 seats in the second phase were rural constituencies. These are overwhelming numbers for a State that is relatively more urbanised when compared to others in the country. According to data placed in the public domain by the leading national daily, Hindustan Times, the Congress had a higher vote-share in 44 per cent of the 126 Assembly seats that were predominantly rural. While this was lower than the Bharatiya Janata Party's 56 per cent of the seats, the contest was close.

Material put out by another English news daily, The Hindu, also tells a similar story. Through tables that it has collated in collaboration with other agencies, the newspaper indicates at the rural-urban divide in voting pattern and also adds that the BJP has done well through the years with increasing urbanisation in the State. For instance, in 2014, the party's vote share went up to 70 per cent in urban regions whereas it was at a healthy 60 per cent in rural constituencies. In the 2015 civic election, the BJP gained more strength in corporations and municipalities as compared to its performance at district and taluka levels. The difference in performance among the two divides has been reflected in the finally tally of 2017. The Congress improved the number of its seats to 80 primarily as a result of its good showing in Saurashtra-Kutch, a major part of which is rural. There are 54 Assembly seats in the region, and the BJP had won 35 in the 2012 Assembly poll. This time, however, the Congress got the upper hand and nearly doubled its 2012 number. Of course, it would be simplistic to assume that the BJP has lost the trust of rural Gujarat or that the Congress has won for itself a firm place in the hearts of the people of that region.



And it would be naive to presume that the Congress is poised, taking off from Gujarat 2017, to win over more rural belts in the country in the coming elections. Other factors such as the Patidar agitation and some level of anti-incumbency of two decades also contributed against the BJP. Besides, it must not be forgotten that the BJP has not been exactly wiped out in rural Gujarat — only, it has performed less better than it did in 2012.

Still, the Gujarat verdict is cause of concern and correction for the party. Even if it is a matter of perception, as the BJP leadership believes, such perceptions have the might to upset calculations for the party as it prepares itself for more electoral battles in the coming months. The rural discontent in Gujarat is for real. Farmers have nurtured grievances over issues of minimum support price and the failure of mechanisms to deliver to them the benefits of schemes that Union and State regimes have announced. It is possible that the BJP, buoyed by the growing support for itself in urban India, has not fully applied its mind to rural distress to the extent of ensuring that the rural population's needs get addressed on the ground. As many commentators have said, it is not so much PAAS (Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti) led by Hardik Patel but Kapas (cotton) that dented the rural support for the party. Cotton-growers of Gujarat have been for long demanding the redressal of their problems. Market prices have fallen for the product, and the minimum support price is hardly any better. Worse, failed rains have seen a slump in cotton produce. While the Government did enhance the minimum support price with a bonus amount, the increased cost of labour and pesticide ensured that the rise was diluted in impact.

The BJP's emphatic victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha election was because both rural and urban India voted as one for the party and for Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. A similar trend was reflected in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election in March 2017. The Assembly elections this year will test the BJP's support in rural regions, because the three major States that vote — Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan — have a far larger share of rural constituencies than Gujarat. The BJP seeks to retain its rule in the last two and win over the first from the Congress.

At the national level, satiating the rural voter has never been an easy task, even if statistics have been robust. According to figures of the Central Statistics Office, agricultural growth has actually gone up since 2012-13 — from 1.5 per cent to 4.9 per cent in 2016-17 (provisional). This is far more encouraging than the growth of the Indian economy, which is at 6.6 per cent as compared to 5.4 per cent in 2012-17 (with two peaks of 7.2 per cent in 2014-15 and 7.9 per cent in 2015-16). However, there is the downside as well, and which more directly tells the story of rural distress. Agriculture, which is the prime occupation of rural India, accounts for less than 20 per cent of the country's economy — according to provisional estimates for 2016-17, it contributed 17.4 per cent, whereas the services sector had a share of about 54 per cent and industry close to 29 per cent. The anomaly is stark given that the agricultural



sector employs 44 per cent of the country's workforce (according to the International Labour Organisation and the World Bank).

Whether the crisis is a matter of perception or otherwise, the political costs of a disgruntled rural voting class are heavy. Two examples will suffice. Chandrababu Naidu lost Andhra Pradesh in 2004 after leading his Telugu Desam Party (TDP) to two successive Assembly wins, primarily because his Government had failed to resolve rural distress in the State as a result of two consecutive droughts and increasing debts of farmers. His party could win just 47 of the 294 seats — in the 1996 election, the TDP had bagged 185 seats. The defeat must have come as a shock to him because he had been feted the world over for good governance, for making Andhra Pradesh an industrial hub and for bringing about a dramatic facelift to Hyderabad. The American magazine TIME had written, "In just five years, he has turned an impoverished rural backwater place into India's new information technology hub." Naidu was named the South Asian of the Year by the magazine. None of this helped in the face of the rural backlash in 2004. Greatly chastened, the TDP chief vowed to amend the mistake and rode back to power a decade later.

The second instance is that of the failure of the BJP's 2004 India Shining campaign. The massive publicity campaign was brilliantly devised, messaged and presented to win for Atal Bihari Vajpayee another term in 2004. It had instant and high recall value and was helmed by a brilliant party strategist, Pramod Mahajan. The idea was sound and even noble: India Shining sought to convey a message to the voters — and to the world in general — that the country was on the move, progressing rapidly and ready to take on a global leadership role under Vajpayee's prime ministership. Yet the BJP lost. While it would be wrong to lay the full blame for the defeat at the doors of the India Shining blitzkrieg, there is no doubt that a large section of India — the rural class — did not buy into the claims. Instead, it preferred the 'pro-poor and for the down-trodden' Congress. On its part, the Congress seemed to have learned lessons, and its Bharat Nirman campaign for the 2009 election focused as much on rural India as it did on the urban class. While a publicity campaign cannot alone win an election, lopsided focus can certainly lead to a defeat.

A bit of number-crunching to understand the India-Bharat complexities at play will be useful. Mail Online India carried an article on January 1, 2013, on the "fight" between the two. While the analytical article concentrated on what lay in store for the political parties in 2014, the larger points it made continue to be relevant. It observed, "Of the 19 most populous States which return the maximum number of candidates to the Lok Sabha, there are as many as 197 urban and semi-urban constituencies while 327 of them are in the rural sprawl. As many as 524 constituencies of the 544 are decided by these 19 States. This is the largest swathe of India and Bharat as we know it." in an article for Business Line, noted farmer-activist Sharad Joshi had sought to understand the differentiation in semantic terms too. He



wrote in February 2003, “India is a notional entity, largely anglicised and relatively better-off, which obtained the legacy of colonial exploitation from the British; while Bharat is largely rural, agricultural, poor and backward, and is subjected to colonial-like exploitation even after the end of the Raj.” Joshi then seemed dismayed that the Government of the day had been doing little to bridge this divide. He had his own check-list which he said required more courage than the Pokhran nuclear test, to implement. He suggested the following: (1) Abolish all restrictive and monopoly regimes in the agricultural sector, including both the access to inputs and the post-harvest treatment of agricultural produce; (2) Abolish the Essential Commodities Act, Food Corporation of India and the Genetic engineering Approval Committee; (3) Improve budgetary allocations for a day-to-day networking between India and Bharat, including roads, waterways, railways and eclectic communications; and, (4) put a moratorium on all coercive recoveries from farmers on account of loan recoveries, electricity dues etc., pending reparations to farmers caused to them over the last 20 years on account of anti-farmer trade policies.

No political party in its right sense can afford to ignore the rural population in the country. There have been some politicians who made a career out of their ‘rustic’ bend of mind, presenting themselves as the messiah of the rural poor. Chaudhary Charan Singh was the foremost among them. Born to a Jat family in Uttar Pradesh, he became a prominent leader of the marginalised farming community, especially in North India, after he initiated land reforms as a Minister in the Uttar Pradesh Government in the 1950’s. Later he took on the Congress for its ‘flawed’ policies towards farmers, and was especially critical of Jawaharlal Nehru’s socialist leaning which he believed did little to reduce the plight of small farmers. He eventually realised his dream of becoming the country’s Prime Minister — even if for a few months, and after quitting the Congress. The other popular farmer leader after Charan Singh, and who took fully exploited the vagaries of the India-Bharat divide, was Mahendra Singh Tikait. Like the veteran politician, he too was a Jat, and held a special status in the rural belt of western Uttar Pradesh. Yet, such was the impact of his agitations that Tikait made a name for himself across India and was wooed by nearly every political party of prominence. His 1988 Boat Club rally in Delhi, which drew five lakh farmers, is still recalled. The Rajiv Gandhi Government was compelled to accede to his 35-point charter of demands that included a higher price for sugarcane and writing off electricity and water dues of farmers.

Interestingly, the age-old tried and tested demands for waiver of power and water dues as well as agricultural loans and higher minimum support price for produce continue to dominate the pro-farmer narrative to this day. Various States have written off small farm loans and enhanced minimum support prices for certain agricultural products. While these decisions keep happening, long-term solutions to farmers’ distress are less easy to come by, despite the fact that experts have been lamenting for long that short-term measures such as relief on loans etc are not sustainable.



Over the decades, various Governments and expert panels have been burning the midnight oil to somehow reduce the India-Bharat gap, and with some amount of success. But there is still a serious divide which needs resolution. The Modi Government has pledged to double farmer income in five years. In the best of circumstances this would be a major challenge; in the prevailing situation it is very formidable and close to, if not altogether, impossible.

(The writer is Opinion Editor of The Pioneer, senior political commentator and public affairs analyst)

(Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the VIF)



About VIF

Vivekananda International Foundation is a non-partisan institute for dialogue and conflict resolution from a nationalist perspective. Some of India's leading experts in the fields of security, military, diplomacy, governance, etc have got together under the institute's aegis to generate ideas and stimulate action for greater national security and prosperity, independently funded.

VIF is not aligned to any political party or business house.

Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Phone No: +91-011-24121764, +91-011-24106698

Fax No: +91-011-43115450

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

www.vifindia.org

 @vifindia

