

## Of Polls, Politics and Punditry\*

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The remarkable and resounding victory of the Grand Alliance in the recent assembly [elections in Bihar](#) may well mark a turning point in Indian politics, after such a comprehensive rejection by the state's electorate of the politics of hate and communal division. Bookending the year that had begun with the huge NDA losses in the assembly elections in Delhi, they also indicate that the electoral strategy of projection of a single personality largely based on hype and bluster instead of solid achievement, along with pitching up communal hysteria, is no longer good enough to prevent a political party facing "gau haran", as the Mahabharata described it.

But there are other ways in which these polls have been important, especially in our increasingly media-driven times. From the point of view of the English speaking national media – and television in particular – the election results have been proved to be more or less a disaster. They proved to be an outstanding example of the limits of both their predictions and their analysis. As is now being widely commented upon in social media and elsewhere, most of the opinion polls, exit polls (and even the preliminary actual results announced by them) were so widely off the mark as to be completely laughable. They completely missed what was clearly a huge wave of support for the Mahagathbandhan, or an equally strong wave of rejection of the NDA at both central and state levels.

Until the day before the counting of votes in Bihar, for months almost all the news channels had been saying that the results were "too close to call" or predicting a slight majority for the NDA alliance. There was only one exit poll conducted by an independent organization for a particular network of TV channels that came close to the eventual results. But this was simply rejected and not even aired because those in control of the network decided that the results were implausible – a call taken sitting far away from the field in Delhi or Mumbai, and no doubt affected by the fact that so many other polls had already declared an NDA victory.

But opinion polls and exit polls are known to be flawed and have a track record that is uncertain at best in most parts of the world. In India they are even less likely to be accurate. Given the small samples in the surveys undertaken in a highly diverse society such as India, with many complex factors affecting the actual voting, the attempt to translate the preferences indicated by a small sample of respondents to vote shares and from there to seats will always be fraught with difficulty and open to question. So perhaps the pollsters and statisticians responsible for attempting such a problematic exercise should not be unduly blamed.

What has been more remarkable – and more worthy of contempt – has been the pompous arrogance of the so-called "expert analysts" who are brought in to dissect the results of these dubious polls. These pundits have also displayed the most remarkable effrontery, as they provided detailed reasons for why the NDA alliance was bound to win, and then moved blithely on to explain why that same alliance inevitably had to lose.

The prize for the greatest amount of egg-on-face clearly went to one particular channel, which in the past has prided itself on its so-called objective and scientific

election analysis. The day before the counting, it ran the results of an exit poll that was claimed to be the largest ever, covering every single constituency in Bihar and broken up by caste, gender and other relevant categories so as to be almost foolproof in its predictions. The next day, barely one hour into counting when only very early results were available, the channel decided to “call” the Bihar election results, in favour of the NDA alliance, which it expected to get an absolute majority.

The talking heads on screen all provided their expert opinions on why this victory of the NDA alliance was not just expected but inevitable. Politicians from the BJP, the largest party in the alliance, were called to be congratulated, with some sycophantic bleating about how this also reflected the satisfaction of the people with the current government at the Centre. Politicians representing the opposite alliance were given short shrift, asked to comment on why they had lost, and when they suggested that it was worth waiting for the final results, impatiently brushed aside. Only when it became clear beyond any doubt that exactly the opposite result was unfolding and that the Mahagathbandhan was set to secure a famous victory with nearly three-fourths majority, did the tune change.

But then the very same analysts immediately came up with convincing reasons for why the Grand Alliance had been likely to win all along, and the NDA was bound to lose. The blatant contempt for viewers, whom they obviously thought to be fools with complete short-term memory loss, meant that they could swing into analysis mode for the opposite result, providing reasons for the huge victory of the regional alliance and now shaking their heads over the mistakes and poor performance of the central government.

This hubris is not confined to those who appeared on television. Many “analysts” who a few weeks before the election had been writing opinion pieces in the press about why the NDA would win or at least scrape through, and what this meant in terms of the overall appreciation of the people for the NDA, have since provided apparently serious dissections of the final results which completely bashed the NDA, without any sense of embarrassment or reserve, and certainly without any mention of their own earlier analyses which were designed to suggest completely different outcomes.

How on earth can we continue to take such people seriously? Particularly when many other news media, including local news channels in Bihar and the vernacular press, had been far more realistic in getting a pulse of the people and being able to guess at what were finally the results? Part of the reason that those in the English language media get away with all this nonsense is that the media groups are increasingly similar, at least in terms of corporate ownership (and therefore control) and willingness to kowtow to the government in power. Therefore they downplay what may be construed as “bad news” and seek to project only more favourable interpretations.

They also spend less money on actual news gathering as opposed to just holding forth on issues. So we are treated to daily “debates” and discussions in which the same set of experts (often moving across channels) provide their analyses or contribute their high-decibel opinions on whatever the channel has decided to project as news. Quite often, silences and absences also play a great role, in depriving the public of crucially important information or of knowledge about alternative views and perceptions that may have more relevance. As a result, despite the differences in style across anchors,

there is increasingly a depressing sameness and herd mentality in the approach to the news, in which veracity is somehow less important than grabbing attention and holding eyeballs and objectivity is only stated rather than practised.

So, even without assuming actual mala fide on the part of media persons, there are genuine reasons to doubt the reliability of much of the mainstream media today and of the commentators who presume to provide the definitive explanations of why things happen. It is difficult to know how to confront this situation, in which the media have next to no accountability, even while selectively deciding on the imposition of accountability on others.

There is one more concern about the political use of such easily influenced media. The Election Commission was completely right to ban the reporting of results from exit polls until the last day of voting is completed, on the grounds that it may influence the voting patterns. But opinion polls also play a similar role. And now that we know how faulty and misleading exit polls can be, surely we should exercise the same scepticism about opinion polls, which are typically based on even smaller samples and even less scientifically conducted? Yet they too are treated with great respect by the media and provided with massive coverage. They are used – and can be misused – to decipher the “mood” of the populace. And the results of successive opinion polls are then treated as “trends” in public opinion, even if they do no more than reflect the vagaries of particular small samples taken at different times. The only hope is that the Indian electorate is too sensible to take seriously the results of such polls that are splashed across the media with such fanfare and chutzpah.

Clearly, we need to think more deeply and carefully about bringing some degree of accountability – or at least reducing the extent of shamelessness – among the mainstream media today. But does the Press Council even care?

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