

May 31, 2019

Electoral Choices of Govindan the Carpenter

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If you belonged neither to the rich nor poor nor the middle class, but to the aspiring artisanal entrepreneur strata, what factors would have influenced your voting decision? Speculations on Govindan the carpenter in Chennai.

Govindan was the person I engaged in 2002 to do the woodwork in my flat in Chennai. To call him a carpenter would not be strictly accurate because the only tool he was ever seen to use was a measuring tape. With that tape, a keen calculating eye and a mind filled with the potentialities of plywood he worked out the length, breadth, depth and finish of cupboards and kitchen shelves before passing on his instructions. At that stage on his traverse of the ladder of success, Govindan had one foot on the rung of artisanship, the other on that of entrepreneurship and a quiet determination to ensure that both were planted on the upper.

In the third week of May 2019, as India waited for voting machines to spill forth the outcome of the election to the 17th Lok Sabha, I kept thinking off and on about Govindan. I had no knowledge of his politics, no guess about the choice he had made and in fact no clue whether he had voted at all. What led me to think about him was the belief that he had more reason to exercise his franchise with care than many million others who make up the enormous, amorphous Indian middle class. That is not to say that the rich, the poor and the rest of the middle class do not consider their choices seriously or that they were not concerned about the outcome of the election. The main reason for focussing on Govindan and his ilk was that their situation offered a starting point for speculating on the ways in which political cross-currents have an impact on persons caught in the middle.

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Govindan was of course by no means representative of an all-India sample. All I know is that he lives and works in Chennai and that leads me to presume that he votes in one of the constituencies located in that city. As a Tamil Nadu resident, the choice he faced would have been between the two major Dravidian parties. Even if the viable candidates in his constituency belonged to alliance partners on either side, his vote would have been conditioned largely by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) - All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) dialectic. The starkness of the choice would have been all the more evident if the segment in which he is registered was also one of the 23 where by-elections were held simultaneously to the state assembly. At the same time Govindan must have been aware that a vote for either of the Kazhagams would count in determining whether the centre would be ruled by a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or a Congress-led alliance. So even if the local dichotomy had been in the forefront of his mind as he went through the exercise of arriving at a decision, he would probably not have set aside all thoughts about the all-India implications.

What factors would have weighed on the mind of such a person as he moved towards a choice? A primary consideration presumably would have been that of access to the candidate. Even though the major part of his business comprises private contract work, there is a vast officialdom that he has to deal with. For this reason, he would have needed to assess which of the candidates on the panel before him was the more accessible. He would have looked at the personal equations if any, family and caste connections if they existed, the candidate's record of dealings with people similarly situated and any personal chemistry that had been established at gatherings big or small. At the next level of assessment, he would have needed to go over the candidate or the party's record in responding to constituents and in dealing with officialdom.

As far as the Govindans of the world are concerned, the ideal candidate is not only the one to whom they can turn when they need help. The candidate should also be one over whom Govindan has some leverage either because of promises directly made, the funds (however small) provided over the years, the grip that his caste/community or professional association can exert over others in the party. Arguably, the leverage factor is more important to the "aspirant" class than it is to any other. The poor have considerably less, if they have any at all, while the upper classes usually have a wider variety of networks that help them to stay on the right side of power. For people situated at Govindan's level, maximising the leverage they have is not a minor consideration.

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In assessing the weight of his own leverage and the optimum manner of employing it, Govindan would have also needed to calculate the strength of the demands that could be made upon him. Most pragmatic Indians draw a line between “corruption for political purposes” and pure greed. Everyone knows that the fighting of an election necessitates the expenditure of a lot more than the limited allocations permitted by law. Electors are also prepared to overlook amounts set aside for purposes other than the campaign. The running of the candidate’s office, living expenses, education and marriage of children, building or improving of residences and a retirement fund fall within the category of “permissibles” provided none are excessive. An aspiring entrepreneur knows that he will have to extend himself a little more because that is what candidates expect of people who are in the business of making money. Since he is an entrepreneur, he also probably has greater expertise in managing the maximum return for what he puts out.

In calculating the returns on investments, the Govindans of the world are forced to look beyond the candidates. They know that the person they are voting for is part of an organisation that has its own culture of demands. In Tamil Nadu, one of the Kazhagams was commonly considered as being “centralised” and the other as “federalist” when it came to corruption. In the case of the former a big sum to the person at the top normally freed the donor from demands by people further down the hierarchy, while in the latter it was more of a free for all. The first option would probably not have been available to an entrepreneur of relatively modest means. That obstacle would not necessarily have led to a resort to the second option for the simple reason that “adjustments” can always be made. A far more relevant consideration would have been the record of delivery and in this specific context, it is not governance that matters but the care extended to supporters. (There was a famous gentleman in an adjoining state who was admired for the care he took of his adherents as much as he was dreaded for the scale of his demands).

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That is not to say that governance in the broader term does not matter even to a voter focussed mainly on his own interests. After all, even entrepreneurs need good roads and other infrastructure, reasonably responsive officialdom, an administration capable of dealing with the unforeseen and so on. All citizens want assurance that security (both their own and their nation’s) and economic stability will not be jeopardised and they want to see some degree of progress in all spheres of life. From experience, voters know that some parties have leaderships that can impose their will on the formal government structure, that others have organisational strengths that enable them to do the same and that yet others have neither. It takes an enormous leap of faith or utter disgust with parties in the first two categories for voters to turn to the third. Without J. Jayalalitha’s and K. Karunanidh’s presence on the electoral scene, the people of Tamil Nadu this time had to rapidly up-date the nebulous assessments they might have hitherto entertained about the successors.

There was yet another unknown that a Govindan would have needed to deal with this time round. Given their iron hold over their own provincial bases, Jayalalitha and Karunanidhi were able to exert autonomy vis a vis their central partners. That assurance was not available during this campaign since both Kazhakams were under new leaderships and the nature of their future relations with the all-India partners was not accurately calculable. The DMK-Congress alliance might have posed less of a dilemma in this regard since it has been around for some time. Those leaning the other way would have needed to assess whether the new local leadership would be able to resist the pressure to subscribe to a Hindi-belt rooted political culture and praxis that they have traditionally found uncomfortable. To once again consider Govindan’s situation in particular, the anti-Muslim sentiment creates practical problems. Many of the suppliers of timber and other material needed for furnishing in Chennai are Muslims. Can he antagonise a whole section of people with whom he has multifarious dealings? Can he even afford a situation where such suppliers are in a state of high uncertainty?

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Some of the most glaring failings of the National Democratic Alliance government of 2014-19 would have affected Govindan directly. Demonetisation adversely affected the sector of the economy in which he makes his living and, in all probability, disrupted his own business cycle. With the construction industry brought to a standstill for a year and more, the furnishing business could not but have taken a bashing. While his transactions with this customer were always by cheque, his transactions with most of his suppliers could well have been in cash or through the informal credit system that operates on the assumption that currency will be handed over in the

short to medium term. His dealings with his workers were almost certainly carried out with the daily handing over of notes. As their patron and main recourse for assistance he would have been hard pressed to resist their requests for help to deal with the crunch caused by the money vacuum. The utter confusion about the reporting of incomes and the setting aside of funds for tax purposes that accompanied the roll out of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) would have compounded his problems.

Govindan presumably has enough wealth to keep him floating above the poverty line. It also means that he would not have been eligible for most of the hand-outs given during the last five years. Given the overall price rise, from which he, unlike government servants, is not protected by inflation-indexed pay and pension, his financial situation is probably not as healthy as it was five years ago. The scale at which he operates is also probably not large enough for him to bring his children into his business. Usually in cases like this, sons, increasingly daughters as well, need jobs to supplement the family income until the business grows sufficiently for their services to be needed to run them. Data can be fudged but people who are active in the market do not rely on official statistics to judge whether employment has expanded or shrunk. They can judge on the basis of ample anecdotal evidence.

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With these harsh realities directly in his face, would Govindan have been caught up in the surge of nationalistic pride that appears to have afflicted a whole lot of people better educated than him? It is probable that for information on national and international affairs he relies on the TV channels as much if not more than on newspapers. If so, he too would have been subjected to the daily dose of images of the Prime Minister meeting foreign leaders or posing in a line of the relevant national costume clad at a summit or waving his arms dramatically at throngs of the faithful in an Indian maidan or stadium abroad. He must have heard the Prime Minister praise our scientists and soldiers and taken note of the underlying message that due credit must also be given to the man uttering the appreciative words.

While the intensity of the daily dosing must have been considerably lower in the Tamil channels, the change in the content of the broadcasts from what it was five years ago must have been welcome. Instead of being sickened by the endless litany of corruption and bickering that was the staple during the second United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, he could take comfort from the anchors' assurance that India had taken its place at the global high table. The surge of patriotic pride might have been particularly irresistible during the episodes encoded into the national consciousness by the words Doklam, Uri and Balakot. Rivals or enemies, especially Pakistan, being given a black-eye on the cricket field or the high mountains is a deed that provides the doer, even the claimer of it, impunity for a fair-sized basket of other sins.

If Govindan is ready to take cues from the talking heads on the box, is he also prepared to generally take the lead on matters somewhat outside his ken from those who have more formal education? During the near decade of our association (furnishing as everyone knows is time elastic as repairs of the old stuff catches up with addition of new stuff) I do not remember him ever asking me for advice on such matters. Even though he knew that I was a senior journalist working for a national newspaper at the time. He would toss news-bits at me from time to time but more in the way of seeing how they bounced off rather than actually asking for guidance. It was really as if he was telling me that we lived in different worlds and he was curious to see the other perspective without any intention of accepting it. However, general talk does leave a subliminal impression more so when the better educated insert angles of perception that might not otherwise have been thought of.

What then does he think of the man who started from life circumstances similar to his own and is currently in position to dictate to those considered socially superior? Does he look at Narendra Modi and think “Who is this person to sound off like this when he is not much more educated than I am”? Or, does he say to himself, “The man started from where I was and look how far he has reached”? Does the Modi story inspire him or at least leave him marvelling at the possibilities of leverage well applied. Or is he disgusted at the relentless devotion to self-projection instead of actual performance? Or, given the specifics of the Tamil Nadu situation, did the Modi phenomenon come into play only marginally?

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No one can blame the BJP for displaying its wares in an extremely effective manner. That is what parties strive to do and that is what they ought to do. The fault in this election cycle lay squarely with the non-BJP parties in a wide swathe of the country who failed to

build coherent and nuanced counter-arguments and embed them in the minds of the voters. Such counter-arguments are necessary not merely for the assessments of the current situation or priorities for the future contained in them. They are necessary because they widen the selection. While in our first-past-the-post system, the voter has to choose one set of options or another, he has to at least be able to see the full range. The Govindans of this country are eminently capable of identifying their own best interests so long as they are not blinded by the glare emanating from a single source.

To go by the election result, Tamil Nadu remained impervious to the wave that swept much of the rest of India. The Dravida political culture probably had much to do with it. Does this mean that strongly entrenched political cultures can resist even messaging that is superbly organised and conducted? In adjoining Kerala at least part of the reason for the United Democratic Front's near sweep could be that a section of UDF-neutral but secular Hindu voters were turned off by majoritarian rhetoric and looked at the Congress as a better medium than the Left for articulating its feelings. The potency and/or potential of strong regional political cultures is an aspect that requires deeper study since it might provide pointers for building resistance to a monolithic threat to India's diversity. What does matter for now is that in Tamil Nadu at least voters were given a chance to seriously consider their own interest instead of being bamboozled by a propaganda onslaught.