

## Decrypting today's psephology and anti-incumbency

Israeli writer Yuval Noah Harari had said that the algorithm is the most important word of the 21st century. But another word that is giving it a run for its money during the electoral season is 'anti-incumbency'. Psephologists are now fond of explaining (without understanding?) a lot of things that happen as a part of anti-incumbency. They almost speak of it the way cricket commentators speak of averages. Even in cricket, it often makes no sense to say that a team won at a venue for 'n' number of times, which often has no correlation or causation with the result in the next game. In cricket, this could add to the entertainment quotient, but to reduce elections to a law of averages is to completely miss the thrust that needs to be there in foregrounding the key issues that matter to people, and why they turn out to vote in such large numbers.

### A displacement of the focus

What such anodyne language of anti-incumbency does is to shift the attention from the issues that matter and reduces it to averages and the business of prediction (like Nostradamus). Even more disarming is that such language tends to normalise discontent. For example, the Congress lost in the Rajasthan Assembly election because that has been the trend for the last 30 years, which displaces the question why are people perennially unhappy with their governments and what are the issues that have been going unheard for 30 years. Had the Congress won in Rajasthan, the debate would be about the Congress having beaten anti-incumbency, and in terms of how the trend was broken. Or, it could then be argued that there is a trend of pro-incumbency, as seen in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

But the question is not about pro-incumbency in Madhya Pradesh but, instead, how a government does win a large number of seats with a not-so-good-looking governance track record. Why did issues of mis-governance not matter? Or, how were they made not to matter? This displacement of focus on social development contributes handsomely to 'electoral autocracy'.

The language of anti-incumbency is a technocratic one that works as a neo-liberal assemblage. It flattens out complex processes to feed the electronic media and digital images. The language of averages and quantifying electoral outcomes turns the electoral process into an algorithmic equation. Part of the problem is that policy preferences and differences between political parties have become so marginal to the process that quantification is the only method left



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to make sense of differences between the parties. The meaninglessness of 'choicelessness' for the electorate is converted into a meaningful-looking language of 'averages', 'patterns' and 'pro-and anti-incumbency'.

### The power of a certain party

Further, the corollary of such a language that empties out the process of issues is the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as an electoral machine. It is the sheer 'speed and scale' that brings forth the language of efficiency and last mile and minute electoral calculations that become the focus of analysis by psephologists. The BJP is today able to address issues through its sheer capacity to generate a great amount of last minute mobilisation. Earlier, we would argue that the electorate suffers from short-term memory that allows political parties to get away with murder. Now it is about last minute campaigning. This again makes 'organisation', 'money' and 'a high-decibel campaign' a part and parcel of a great strategy and electoral engineering. It again displaces the fact of why or how organisational power allows the BJP to subvert social power dynamics. Of how a great degree of social fragmentation is forged to divide social groups. Of what it does to weaken the ability to raise discontent. At one level, the process is about normalising discontent. And at another, about criminalising dissent and the intermediary space which is filled by organisational heft and meticulous planning. All of these processes are later analysed as either pro or anti-incumbency!

Finally, electoral mobilisation has normalised elections into becoming a spectacle. The spectre of drama is a part of electoral communication, but the impact on social ethics and the fabric of collective trust becomes sidelined. It has become a new normal for election analysts and psephologists to gloat over and expect the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to perform some last minute magic that will tilt votes in the BJP's favour even if the BJP has performed miserably in terms of governance. In Karnataka, for example, the BJP faced a great degree of discontent because of massive corruption and other related issues of social apathy. But Mr. Modi, in last minute attempts, tried to convert it into a debate on Bajrang Bali, misinterpreting it as Bajrang Dal, or the other way round. Mr. Modi further claimed that the Congress was interested in seceding Karnataka from India. In Gujarat, in earlier elections, it was about Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and a former Vice-President taking 'supari'

from across the border against Mr. Modi. What does such baseless discourse do to trust that is necessary for any functional democracy in the long run? Deliberation is being gradually displaced by 'conspiracy', and social issues get converted into a discourse on securitisation.

All these electoral battles become converted into a war zone and a zero-sum game. The last minute pressure – like the last over in a cricket match – brings tension and drama, and is like the climax of a crime thriller. It shifts from deliberating on issues to, instead, what is most entertaining. And that in turn becomes, or is attempted to be pushed as, the criteria of electoral choice. When Mr. Modi succeeds it is often typified as 'Modi Magic' and attributed to Mr. Modi's great oratory skills. But what is happening is a stuffing down the throats of people of high-decibel and extremely dystopian images meant to create cognitive and emotional dissonance. Elections are moving away from issues to that of speed, scale and organisational efficiency replacing or off-setting electoral choices made on the basis of issues.

Psephology and electoral analysis are already a willing part of this shift. They are more techniques and technologies of power dynamics rather than analysis meant for reflection and deliberation. What such technocratic psephology does is to easily convert it and make it a part of the campaign of the ruling dispensation. Why so many exit polls go so dramatically wrong is never a point of discussion. But each time there are elections, we are back to this language of anti-incumbency and averages, where critical debate and reflection are swept under the carpet.

### Disappearance of issues

Over a period, there has been near-complete invisibilisation of a lot of issues that were considered a part of public discourse in India. What are the levels of poverty in India? And, Below Poverty Line (BPL)? What percentage of the population is BPL, which was part of public debate not so long ago, and which has been replaced now by the language of GDP growth rates – again the language of numbers and averages? What are the working conditions of migrants in the informal sector that had become invisible till migrants began to walk back home during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown? It is a different matter that death itself became invisible during the pandemic. It is this technocratic invisibilisation that has become the root and source of hyper-nationalism and the freshly minted fantasy of becoming a *vishwaguru*.

Election analysis is now entertainment feeding hyper-nationalism, in which critical debate and reflection are missing

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## Harvest the Odisha story to ensure food security

As the world's leaders are in a huddle for COP28, or the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (November 30 to December 12, 2023), in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, the worsening impact of the climate crisis paints a grim picture for the planet, peace and prosperity.

Disasters are projected to increase to 560 per year, that is 1.5 per day; hunger and malnutrition are expected to grow by 20% if the climate change impact goes unchecked, and food productivity is expected to decline by 21% due to global warming.

As the world witnesses a worsening global food crisis precipitated by the mounting climate crisis, spiralling conflicts and distressed livelihoods, Odisha's transformational journey is increasingly being cited as a model and a source of ideas for creating food security that is built around equity and sustainability.

Odisha's story has three specific themes in the current scenario: how the State strengthened food security by transforming agriculture through a community-driven approach and built resilience to climate impact.

### Agricultural transformation

In the past two decades, Odisha has moved from importing rice from other States and making ends meet in the pre-2000s to, in 2022, producing 13.606 million tonnes of food grains, its highest production on record.

There are two notable aspects: a majority of farmers are small/marginal, and productivity has increased despite stable crop area. The average rice yield, which is Odisha's main crop, has tripled in two decades. In 2000-01, the average yield was 10.41 quintals per hectare, but by 2020-21, it had increased to 27.30 quintals per hectare.

Kalahandi district was known as the "land of hunger," but has now been transformed into Odisha's rice bowl. Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik shared this at the United Nations World Food Programme headquarters, where he addressed Odisha's commitment towards



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With climate change threatening global food productivity, Odisha's efforts in climate-proofing its agricultural system have resulted in a unique development model

achieving the 'Zero Hunger' goal of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2.

The focus is on small and marginal farmers and increasing their income. This has directly contributed to strengthening their food security and creating resilient livelihoods.

Implementing flagship schemes such as Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) and disseminating scientific crop management practices through conventional and digital extension have increased non-paddy crop cultivation, while paddy cultivation has decreased. Schemes such as the Odisha Millet Mission have also helped diversify crops and promote climate resilience.

### Resilience and sustainability

Due to its geographical location and physical conditions, Odisha is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. This phenomenon can disrupt current growth strategies and exacerbate poverty, as it may lead to a loss of life, livelihoods, assets, and infrastructure. Odisha has proactively developed a comprehensive Climate Change Action Plan to address these concerns.

This plan covers various sectors, including agriculture, coastal zone protection, energy, fisheries and animal resources, forests, health, industries, mining, transport, and urban and water resources. It was formulated by a team of experts from multiple departments and incorporates inputs from civil society. Various departments and agencies are responsible for implementing the activities identified in the plan, which are being monitored by a committee headed by the Chief Secretary.

The approach towards climate resilience is being developed from the bottom up. The Crop Weather Watch Group conducts weekly meetings, sees field visits by officers, and has video conferences to monitor the crop programme. This helps the authorities to take necessary measures during adverse weather conditions such as cyclones, floods, and droughts, which are frequent in the State.

Crop planning is done at the district level by

officials of allied departments, considering the agro-climatic zone. Farmers are adopting climate-resilient cultivation practices, that include integrated farming, zero-input-based natural farming, non-paddy crops, better water management, water-saving devices, e-pest surveillance, and large-scale farm mechanisation with women-friendly drudgery-reducing farm implements. Training farmers in crop-specific techniques, including integrated nutrient and pest management, has boosted food grains production.

### Social protection

The consistent improvement of the agricultural sector has made Odisha a surplus State for paddy production. It is the fourth most significant contributor to the paddy pool of the Food Corporation of India. According to the available statistics for 2020-21, Odisha produces 9% of the total rice in India and accounts for 4.22% of the total food-grain production of the country.

The partnership between the United Nations World Food Programme and the Government of Odisha has seen innovation for pilots on improving food and nutrition security schemes, such as the application of biometric technology in the Targeted Public Distribution System in remote Rayagada district back in 2007, or rice fortification in Gajapati district, to name a few. In the State Ranking Index for the National Food Security Act by the Department of Food and Public Distribution, Government of India, for 2022, Odisha emerged as the top-ranked State in the entire country. The WFP collaborates with the Government of Odisha on its food security, livelihood and climate resilience initiatives.

Odisha's transformative journey, from food grains scarcity to the generation of surplus, sustained efforts in climate-proofing its agricultural system, crop diversification, protection of the interest of the smallholders, and food and nutrition security for the vulnerable presents a unique development model for other States in the context of the challenges of global climate change.

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