

Profile of an Indian MP

With the UPA having fundamentally become UP Agenda, the alliance has switched horses, and perhaps even riders, four-fifths of the way through. Politicians are a convenient scapegoat for everything that goes wrong and inevitably, ensuing horse-trading will vindicate this belief. However, we should spare a thought for Prakash Karat and the Left. In a system where politicians are perceived to be an unprincipled lot, the Left has at least stood up for what it believes to be its principles, though ruffled egos have also contributed. It is a separate matter that most of us don't agree with those principles. **Every country gets the government it deserves. Contrary to impression, this expression didn't originate with Aristotle, or assorted US presidents.** It's a quote from Joseph Marie De Maistre (1811). Under the Constitution, the government has different strands. While lambasting politicians, let's remember legislatures are elected. Unlike other organs of government, politicians (at least elected ones) are accountable to citizens once every five years, if not with greater frequency. **If we have a mess today, we collectively have ourselves to blame for choices exercised in 2004. These are choices we will again have to exercise not in 2008, but certainly in 2009. Sensible choice requires information.**

For some time, robust information didn't exist. Thanks to the Election Commission's insistence on affidavits from candidates, for the 2004 elections to Lok Sabha, we have data and these were analysed for 541 (not 543) winning MPs. Unfortunately, this analysis by the Public Affairs Centre (PAC), Bangalore, has not been disseminated sufficiently. Understandably, information is constrained by questions asked through those affidavits. **Subject to this, we know the following.**

First, despite India being a young country, the average age of MPs is 53; 14 per cent are above 65 and only 6.5 per cent are under 35. On an average, the oldest MPs are in the CPI, CPM and DMK and the youngest MPs are in the BSP, Shiv Sena and RJD. Neither the Congress nor the BJP has that many young MPs. Assam, Karnataka, Punjab, West Bengal and Uttarakhand generally contribute to the gerontocracy and the younger ones come from Haryana, J&K and UP.

Second, almost 75 per cent of MPs possess graduate or post-graduate degrees, with a strong preference for law degrees. Six per cent do not have matriculate degrees. On an average, educational standards are far superior for the RJD, BJD and CPI and worst for the Shiv Sena and BSP. Educational standards are superior for Himachal, Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and worst for Haryana and

Uttarakhand. Not surprisingly, younger MPs are better educated. Women MPs are younger and better educated than their male counterparts.

Third, the average MP is worth Rs 1.64 crore. But the average non-SC/ST MP is worth Rs 2 crore. These assets are mostly houses and agricultural land and the more educated an MP, the lower the asset value. On an average, the richest MPs are from the Congress; 10 per cent of Congress MPs have assets worth more than Rs 10 crore. However, agricultural assets tend to be more in the RJD and BSP. Poorest MPs are in the CPM, BJD, BSP and CPI. The richer MPs come from Punjab, Andhra and Maharashtra while the poorer ones come from West Bengal, Orissa and Kerala.

Fourth, a large number of MPs have criminal cases pending against them, reflecting criminalisation of politics, or perhaps more accurately, politicisation of criminals. The uneducated have more criminal cases against them, as do those who are in the 36-45 age group. MPs with criminal links are concentrated in Bihar, UP, MP and Jharkhand while MPs from Himachal, Delhi, Uttarakhand and J&K are clean. MPs with criminal cases are most among the RJD, BSP and SP. It is fashionable to deride politicisation of criminals, especially when correlations (which don't necessarily indicate causation) suggest that to be successfully elected as an MP, one should have criminal connections and money, with education perhaps a disadvantage.

However, caveats are necessary. There are diverse crimes and within the IPC (Indian Penal Code) definition of crime, there are minor and innocuous crimes. The PAC gets around this by only classifying major crimes, defined as those leading to imprisonments of five years or more. Nevertheless, these people have only been accused, not convicted. Once convicted, they can be barred from candidature as long as they serve out their sentences. To debar them once they have served out their sentences is to turn natural justice on its head. More commonly, they are accused and not convicted because of warts in the criminal justice system. That's an indictment of justice delivery. A citizen can choose not to vote for a candidate with a criminal case pending. But debarring such candidates is also tantamount to indicting those who are presumed innocent and upsets all principles of jurisprudence. As is to be expected, concentration of such MPs is in geographical areas where the criminal justice system doesn't particularly deliver. The armchair solution of excluding such candidates is probably non-sequitur. Improving delivery of criminal justice is the critical argument.

To get back to the point, 2004 Lok Sabha doesn't present a pretty picture. **Will 2009 be different?** That's a function of collective citizen choice and information dissemination and use. For Parliament, we don't have a time-series on whether voting patterns have become more informed and demanding. However, we have begun to have it for states, courtesy compilation of affidavits by the Delhi-based Liberty Institute. These are yet incomplete and we will get a time-series only

when states go through elections in 2008 and beyond. Consequently, an interesting question like criminal antecedents can't yet be probed, not until we have data for states like Bihar, UP, MP and Jharkhand.

However, consider the 2008 Karnataka elections. The richest MLA, M. Krishnappa, was elected from Vijay Nagar constituency on a Congress ticket and had assets worth Rs 129 crore. Twenty-five out of 218 MLAs had assets worth more than Rs 10 crore. In 2004 in Karnataka, the richest MLA, J. Krishna Palemar, was elected from Surathkal constituency on a BJP ticket and had assets worth Rs 34.6 crore. Forty-five out of 211 MLAs had assets worth more than Rs 10 crore. While it is difficult to control for other variables, there is no evidence to suggest that the importance of money in fighting elections is becoming less.

In comparison, the average Delhi MLA (2003) is quite poor. Vijay Singh Lochav, the richest, was elected on a Congress ticket from Mahipalpur and had assets worth only Rs 2.8 crore. A pity, one can't track the financial enrichment of candidates as they become legislators and ministers.

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