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Polling the impossible

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Polls are not always reflective of public opinion. Their credibility depends on the type of persons engaged for the exercise.

The recent CNN-IBN poll published in The Hindu was conducted by a reputed Center for Study in Developing Societies (CSDS) and supervised nationally by an eminent academician, Dr. Yogendra Yadav.

Polls are always tricky affairs, largely because of the (obviously) small sample. This can be compensated for by the sample design, which should ensure not only randomness but also make sure that there is no bias in selection of respondents.

The next tricky bit is the compilation of the answers. In a country where many are not literate, the accuracy and integrity of recording the answers correctly depends entirely on the interviewers. They need to be trained properly and, most of all, need to be honest and unbiased and not let their views become the views of the respondents.

All pollsters know these facts and live with them and they take, hopefully, precautions to ensure integrity of the poll.

The CSDS poll included questions regarding Telangana, Sri Krishna Committee on Telangana (SKC) and current electoral chances of political parties in Andhra Pradesh.

As far as the Telangana question was concerned, the poll reported that opinion in Telangana had moved in favor of statehood from 42% in 2009 to 50% in 2011, while in the rest of the state 71% were against division in 2009 and this figure rose to 90% in 2011.

As far as the Telangana sample is concerned, what is curious is that the 2009 poll is reportedly taken in May, just five months after the election when every political party in the state except the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, was in favor and promised statehood for Telangana.

The people of Andhra Pradesh, much less Telangana, factored this in when more than 76% of them voted for the Congress, Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) and others supporting statehood. In this context, the sample results seem odd. What is even more curious is that after the Government of India had agreed on December 9, 2009, to the Andhra Pradesh All-Party

recommendation for Telangana statehood, the 2011 figure should be so low, even in Telangana.

This perception is further reinforced by a clarification published (in the Hindu and on lokniti.org website), which says: “Our survey clearly shows that within the Telangana region nearly two-thirds of those who have an opinion support a separate state. Since 2004, when the CSDS started asking this question in Andhra Pradesh, the support for a separate state has increased consistently within the Telangana region.”

Now the published figures say 50% but this clarification says 66.66%! Curiouser and curiouser!

However, the second question asked by CSDS (but only in Rayalaseema) was views on the trifurcation into Andhra, Telangana and Rayalaseema.

It had no takers in Rayalaseema - the proportion in favor fell from 3% in 2009 to 1 % in 2011. The lack of support for statehood for Rayalaseema seems curious with many of its major leaders – who presumably have their ears to the political street – seem to opt for it when Telangana materializes.

The third question (or set of questions) relates to the Sri Krishna Committee (SKC) and its six options- though this seems redundant if the first two questions were considered decisive.

However, the results showed that only 13 % in Telengana opted for maintenance of the status quo and another 12% the other options – a total of 25%. It would be reasonable to assume that statehood was a preference of 75% of the remainder except that 27% had no opinion on the subject!! Thus the figure of 48% for statehood is reconciled – add the 27% and we have instead 75% for statehood. So now everything depends on whether 27% of the Telangana sample really had no opinion whatsoever?

On the specific question of bifurcation with Hyderabad as its capital, 48% of the Telengana respondents were in favor. So now we have 48%, 50%, 66.66% and 75% in Telangana in favor of separation!

Oddly only 5% in Rayalaseema and none in Coastal Andhra were in favor of Telangana Regional Council, which was SKC’s only solution for maintenance of the status quo.

When CSDS was asked by this writer, they were kind enough to give him the sample breakup: out of a total of 1418 sample interviews, the sample size for Telangana was 532, for Coastal Andhra 567 and for Rayalaseema it was 319. The sample size for the SKC question was the same as the question on Telangana/United Andhra.

While Coastal Andhra and Telangana got almost equal weights (as their population was of the same order of magnitude), Rayalaseema with half the population of each of the other two regions got 60% higher weight than it should have.

This may not matter very much as it can be adjusted later, except that in publishing the figures Rayalaseema has been given equal weight with the other regions – thus the “All Andhra Pradesh” figure turns out to be a simple average of figures for the three regions. Thus, instead of 55% of an “All Andhra Pradesh” sample wanting to preserve the status quo, the true figure would be only 45% if adjusted for the population size that the sample represents! The third set of questions relates to voting preferences.

This indicates that if an election was held now in Telangana the TRS with 36% voter support would wipe out the rest of the parties as the Congress would get only 18%, and TDP 15%, voter support. In the rest of the state, YSR Congress has 36% voter support, while Congress Party has 32% and TDP 24% - indicating triangular fight- results of which are unpredictable.

The criticism of the choice of persons conducting the poll in State is interesting. CSDS itself says that some aspects of the conduct of the poll do lead to suspicion though it defends the conduct obliquely and still stands by the process and its results.

It says: “The State of the Nation Survey was coordinated in Andhra Pradesh by Mr. Narsimha Rao (a fact duly reported in The Hindu) of the Nagarjuna University, Guntur..... Of late, in his personal capacity, he has been the honorary convener of the Joint Action Committee for United Andhra Pradesh.

Since the survey was carried out by the students from Nagarjuna University... most of the investigators that went to Telangana were from Seemandhra though some field investigators did hail from Telangana region.”

Now it is well known, at least since 2004 when CSDS ran the first Telangana survey questions, that there was heightened passion for Telangana statehood leading to 600 youths committing suicide for it.

Further, since late 2009 till date there has been agitation also in the rest of Andhra Pradesh. The SKC traveled all over Telangana and also in the rest of the State. On the Telangana statehood issue it commented: “This option implies accepting the full demands of a large majority of Telangana people for a separate state that will assuage their emotional feelings and sentiments as well as the perceived sense of discrimination and neglect.

The Committee’s impression, gained during its extensive tours of Telangana region indicated that a very large number of people from Telangana were highly supportive of the demand for a separate Telangana; an appreciable segment was found to be neutral; while some sections were not in favour of it “(p.451-52).

CSDS could not be ignorant of what is happening in the heart of India. Given the palpable level of passion and excitement and commitment especially among the academics and students, was it wise to repeat the process adopted earlier for other less

emotive surveys for this delicate and important question? That the CSDS was aware of the problem is confirmed by its clarification where it admits that: “.our investigators were physically thrown out from two assembly segments (Mahbubabad and Ibrahimpatanam) and their work was disrupted elsewhere too by pro-Telangana activists”.

However, CSDS has displayed exemplary conduct after the poll when it declared in response to protests: “Given the charged political context that prevails in the state, we should have anticipated that the affiliation of our coordinator and the composition of our team would lead to distrust (among those advocating a separate state).Presentation of the survey findings on Telangana without addressing these legitimate apprehensions was (possibly) an error of judgment. ”

If they had left out the words in brackets, it would sum up the true position.

Moral: Polls are not always reflective of public opinion.