

POLL 2004—THE VOTER WANTS AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Suman Sahai

Once campaigning had started for election 2004, Gene Campaign conducted a straw poll in five states, Assam, Rajasthan, Bihar, Jharkhand and UP, to look at the candidates' perception of the main problems of their areas and whether agricultural development featured anywhere on the priorities of the candidates of the major political parties. A total of 39 candidates from the main political parties in 14 parliamentary constituencies were questioned. These included Jorhat and Koliabor in Assam; Nalanda and Nawada in Bihar; Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Khunti in Jharkhand; Tonk, Sikar, Bhilwara, Alwar and Jaipur in Rajasthan and Aonla and Shahjahanpur in UP. The candidates were asked two basic questions: What are the most important problems of your constituency and what would you address first were you to be elected?

The poll questioned about 50 voters each in three to four assembly segments per parliamentary constituency. The voters in the largely rural constituencies were similarly asked what their most important problems were and what is the first thing they wanted their elected representative to do for them. The results of the survey showed the complete mismatch between what the voters listed as their chief problems and what the candidates would like to do in their constituencies, or at least what they professed they would do, were they to be elected.

The straw poll indicates that barring two notable exceptions, (not surprisingly from the left parties), agricultural development was not the principal concern of any of the 39 candidates even though they were contesting from largely rural constituencies. Just two candidates of those surveyed, Sri Amra Ram, the CPM candidate from Sikar, Rajasthan and Sri Drupad Borgohain, the CPI candidate from Jorhat, Assam said that one of their main priorities was agriculture. Most candidates wanted to provide roads and electricity, which seemed to be the number one priority. Many wanted to promote tourism and beautify their cities. Other responses by candidates included control of erosion (Assam), good administration, employment, and degree colleges (not primary education). Many sitting MPs who were contesting the election claimed they had done everything that needed to be done and there were no more problems in their constituencies! This was unsurprisingly, not echoed by the voters of their constituency. Some candidates in UP simply stated that the issues they were projecting were the achievements of their party leader.

On the other hand, rural voters overwhelmingly listed agriculture development, as their major need. This category included factors like good quality seed, protection from spurious pesticides, agricultural machines and implements like threshers, markets to sell their agricultural produce, better price for their produce, assured irrigation, training and extension facilities, treatment and recovery of wasteland. Drinking water was next, followed by issues in health and education. Of the main needs expressed, roads and electricity were last, in sharp contrast to the priority expressed by the candidates.

This disconnect, at such odds with the India Shining campaign of the BJP is probably a major reason for their less than hoped for performance. However, it must be said that the neglect of the agriculture sector in the election focus of political parties ran across the board. Agricultural problems and agricultural development were simply nobody's first priority. If that appears shocking in a country that is three quarters rural and where agriculture still dominates the economy, we must reflect on the nature of the political process that has come to establish itself in this country. When film stars are brought in to 'catch' votes, how can the election debate focus on developing what is perceived to be a distinctly unglamorous sector. Agriculture is not 'cool',

like Information Technology is, so if development is mentioned at all, it is planned via IT and agriculture remains on the periphery.

It does not require extraordinary intelligence to figure out that unless the situation is made better for the majority of the people, the country as a whole cannot prosper. Rammanohar Reddy talks of an Enclave India of the elite for whom things are going well indeed. But that constitutes just 100 million people. Of the remaining 900 million, a large percentage would need strong support and investment in agriculture for things to improve. There is no getting away from this central fact. India has to finally put in place a comprehensive policy for developing the agriculture and rural sector that is sensitive and accommodating of the reality of the lives of rural and adivasi people.

The challenge before the new government and all governments that will follow, is to craft a policy to develop rural areas with agriculture as the base, to which should be added the finest that science and technology can offer. Such a development plan should build on the formidable knowledge of local communities about agriculture, bioresources and their economic and social uses, coupled with high tech, sustainable practices for their exploitation, a proactive stance in the WTO and a determination to protect the agriculture sector in the upcoming negotiation and an understanding of international markets, to develop our own USP. This fairly low cost, equitable approach should form the backbone on which other development schemes can be added on.

The author can be contacted at – genecamp@vsnl.com