

FAIR POLLS ARE AS IMPORTANT AS FREE PRESS

Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao

Free and fair polls are as important as free press and free speech for a vibrant democracy and for its taking roots. They are two sides of the same coin of democracy.

Banning poll surveys is no answer nor a solution for the current concerns. But, manipulation of poll surveys could be worse. Both should be avoided, if not voluntarily, but by a public discourse and consensus such a way that we have some understanding of what should be avoided and what should be ensured for an impartial and transparent electoral process.

This requires some understanding of “effects” of poll surveys covered or disseminated in news media -instead of arguing that they do not make a difference to the poll process and on voting behavior. If that is so why so much *hungama* about surveys? That has been an industry view point and as an interested party - media has been perpetuating those views as well.

I had written more than twenty five years ago and also did research on the kind of effects of poll surveys (including exit polls), hyped by the news media can create a make believe way of their outcome and estimates. These effects are not uniform or similar every time. These trigger various types of reactions including bandwagon, underdog, complacency and tactical voting.

Against this context, I support Election Commission's efforts to ensure their mandate -free and fair elections. It's initiative is to elicit and involve political parties and in the process sensitize larger public and remind other stake holders of opportunities that they have and could take on in the context and in availing poll surveys in public media.

Referring to experience of other countries in this regard is irrelevant, given the kind of peculiarities, differences and inequalities we have across the country. Arguing that many countries have no regulation of any kind is not true and even misleading. The fact that even in USA there are some is talked as incidental.

I have all along argued and continue to oppose complete ban of poll surveys. But if and when they are put out for larger public through mass media, they need to be transparent and stand up to electoral codes of the country. The best bet in that course is for the stakeholders to take precautions on their own, so that poll process is not vitiated any way, even unwillingly.

This view of mine is even more relevant today than ever before. As today, public opinions are far more dynamic and vulnerable than ever before. There has been a decline of parties and political ideologies. The more of that decline, the more the scope for constant change in opinions on voting. And then a quarter or more news media is now under control of political interests and corporate. What a poll survey brings out and projects in the news media is far more context specific and it's relevance and even accuracy would altogether be different at a different context and time point making the very exercise futile and even misleading. Taking recourse and linking the concern in this regard to press freedom or free speech is an industry perspective of diverting the core issue.

Way back in 1978 or so I have written in India Today's sister periodical on do's and don'ts of poll surveys. In my recent book, “Poll Surveys in Media – An Indian Perspective” (2012 by NBT) I have elaborated further on these factors. A mechanism of checks and balance need to be evolved so that we have the best of both....effective free press and free and fair polls.