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Andhra's Polls Should Temper Political Hopes from Cash Transfers

By: Venkateshwarlu K.

The ousted government in Andhra Pradesh had banked heavily on Direct Benefit Transfers to build a political constituency, but the electorate might be asking for development too.

The stunning debacle of the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) in Andhra Pradesh assembly and Lok Sabha elections points to the limits in parties seeking votes through Direct Benefit Transfers (DBTs) packaged as need-based welfarism for people in fetching votes.

Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, the outgoing chief minister, was confident that the DBTs worth Rs. 2,70,000 crore delivered during the five years of his government would secure him a second term. He had bragged how he had ensured a system where beneficiaries received DBTs at the press of a button, and made it a tagline for his campaign. “The results will ensure that the whole country stands up and looks towards Andhra Pradesh to watch these numbers,” he said a fortnight before the results came out.

As the results started pouring in on 4 June, it became clear that his calculations about a DBT- powered victory had gone awry. The YSRCP won a mere 11 seats in the assembly and 4 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Jana Sena and BJP alliance romped home with a landslide, winning 135, 21 and 8 assembly seats respectively while securing 22 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats.

Where did they go wrong when both claimed near saturation coverage of DBTs and non-DBTs? Or is it some smart thinking on the part of beneficiaries to opt for regime change to optimise their benefits ? Or is it that people have become wiser and have started looking much beyond these DBTs ? While it could be a combination of these factors that might have worked in making their choice, the third option looks plausible with the people of Andhra Pradesh rejecting a politician who turned delivery of DBTs into a well-oiled leakage-proof machinery. It is possible that people saw the DBTs coming at the cost of economic growth, and employment-generating development. In media interviews in the run up to the elections, several women in Andhra Pradesh said they favoured jobs for their sons rather than transient cash transfers.

|| Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's way of distributing DBT's might have weakened his party's local machinery.

The CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey, published in *The Hindu*, shows that four of 10 of the poor, more than half of the lower middle class and middle class, and over six of every 10 of the rich voted for the opposition TDP-Jana Sena-BJP alliance. This voting pattern reflected how the poor, benefitting from DBTs, went with YSRCP; while others favoured the opposition in the belief that the YSRCP was not working enough for development of the state. That half of the votes of below 25 and close to two-thirds of the votes in the 26-35 age group have gone into the alliance kitty indicates that youth were indeed concerned about their shrinking job opportunities. The opposition alliance also performed better both in urban and rural areas, which again hints at people uniformly voting for change .

Clearly, the strategy of putting all eggs in the DBT basket did not work wonders for the YSRCP. Reddy might have learnt that from the experience of K. Chandrasekhara Rao in next door Telangana, where two- time chief minister K. Chandrasekhara Rao banked heavily on DBTs but lost the 2023 assembly elections. And as with Rao, a public perception of Reddy being inaccessible and arrogant could have also been a factor in his defeat.

Ironically, Reddy's way of distributing DBTs might have weakened his party's local machinery. He bypassed the panchayati raj institutions and built a huge parallel administrative structure of village secretariats and deployed thousands of young volunteers drawn from the party cadre to ensure delivery of these DBTs.

An unintended consequence was that the party's local leadership and MLAs lost touch with the masses. People in the villages approached volunteers rather than the local party cadre or MLAs, which weakened the party machinery at the local level, as some analysts have pointed out. Ahead of the elections, the YSRCP went on to deny tickets to 50 sitting MLAs, some of them based on feedback from the political consultancy IPAC that they failed to connect enough with people. (It must be noted though, that the volunteer model may have helped the party retain 40% vote share in the elections.)

Focussing on welfare, Reddy could not see a silent perception of ‘no development’ building across the state, with people experiencing bad roads, poor infrastructure, and high power tariffs, apart from high inflation. The perception of lack of development and a mood of anti-incumbency could explain the high voter turnout with the polling percentage soaring to 80.66%, which included voters from Hyderabad and other places who returned home to vote.

Reddy also earned an image of being politically vengeful. Right from the beginning of his term, he ordered demolition of the 'Praja Vedika', a hall built by his predecessor Chandrababu Naidu for meeting and receiving petitions from people. His government targeted political opponents and common citizens alike.

To give just two examples: K. Sudhakar, a government doctor in Visakhapatnam district was [suspended and arrested](#) for highlighting lack of PPE kits and masks at his hospital during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Videos of his arrest, with hands and legs tied up, went viral. The police branded him as mentally challenged and admitted him into an institute of mental health. He went into depression, was infected by Covid-19 and later died of a cardiac arrest. Another case was of [P. Ranganayakamma](#) of Guntur who was arrested by the police for sharing a post on social media questioning the failure of government to act against the management responsible for a gas leak in LG Polymers in Visakhapatnam that killed 12 people.

State government employees felt aggrieved as their monthly salaries and pay hikes were delayed and their demand for restoring the old pension scheme was ignored. Police clamped down on them when they tried to stage a huge protest in Vijayawada. Anganwadi workers too faced police ire when they hit the streets demanding better wages.

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Jagan Reddy's experiment with three capitals for the state too did not go down well with people. Not much work was done in any of the three designated places, Visakhapatnam being the executive/administrative capital, Kurnool, the judicial one and Amaravati, the legislative one. Just before the elections the YSRCP even pitched for Hyderabad, though the ten-year period for being treated as the common capital was to end in June 2024. Imagine the angst of people who were first driven out of the then Madras, the capital of the Madras Presidency, then from Kurnool after formation of the united Andhra Pradesh in 1956 and then from Hyderabad in 2014 after the partition of the state. When they thought Amaravati would indeed be their permanent capital, they had to contend with the idea of three capitals, a proposal that never really took off, leaving them virtually capital-less. For farmers who gave away 33,000 acres for Amaravati and carried out a long struggle to retain it as capital and for others who endured the pain of not having a proper capital, voting out YSRCP became a priority.

Other policy initiatives also rebounded on the YSRCP. The party spoke of introducing prohibition in a phased manner, but ended up promoting dubious liquor brands that were sold at exorbitant prices. Some alleged that the gains went to the ruling party leaders and the cash transfers being doles out were being taken back at the liquor vend. (The excise revenue during this purported phased ban on liquor rose to Rs 23,785 crore in 2022-23 from Rs 17,473 crore in 2019-20.)

Illegal and indiscriminate sand mining and black market prices rising to ten times the government fixed price led to allegations YSRCP leaders were misusing government policy for private gains.

Even as the campaigning was on, the Telugu Desam and Jana Sena weaponised the Andhra Pradesh Land Titling Act which introduced a system to designate land ownership and grant titles.. The alliance launched a vigorous campaign dubbing it as “a land grabbing act”, and infused fear among people that the government would take over their land using the act. It had the desired effect in weaning voters away from the YSRCP. (One of the first five orders that Chandrababu Naidu signed after assuming charge as the chief minister was a decision to scrap the act.)

Several such instances added to the anti-incumbency sentiment. But the turning point was the way the YSRCP government targeted Chandrababu Naidu for financial irregularities in the AP Skill Development Corporation. His arrest galvanised the TDP into action and the cadre kept up the tempo into the elections. with a strident state-wide campaign of how “one chance” sought by Jagan Reddy has taken the state's development back by 20 years.

Naidu's arrest not only evoked state-wide sympathy but brought together the local opposition parties – the Jana Sena led by popular Telugu film actor Pawan Kalyan and the BJP. Despite doubts over the compatibility of TDP and Jana Sena, given the traditional rivalry between the Kamma and Kapu communities (their respective support base), their leaders ensured vote transfers between them and the BJP. The result was the significant spike in the opposition's vote share to 56%, compared with the YSRCP's 40%. The victory was comprehensive cutting across all sections of the society showing the level of anti-incumbency suffered by YSRCP.

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The CSDS-Lokniti survey showed that the three-party opposition alliance got more than 50% percent of the votes of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Madigas and Malas (Scheduled Caste communities), and more than 30% of the votes of Christians, Muslims, the Reddy community, and other upper castes. The YSRCP won more than 50% of the votes of the Reddy community, Christians, upper castes and Muslims. It got 40% vote of the Malas, Madigas, Other Scheduled Castes and Yadavs, and more than 30% of the OBCs and more than 20 percent of the Kapus, Scheduled Tribes, and Gouds.

The elections results could force political parties to recast manifestos that look beyond DBTs and strike a balance between welfare and development. For now, Andhra's people having plumped for a seasoned leader in a state struggling for everything from finding sufficient resources for development to creation of enough job opportunities for the youth.

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