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Making the right choice

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Indians are used to seeing their filmstars sell products on TV but, probably for the first time, one of them is trying to sell informed judgement. The Association for Democratic Reform's 'Sacche Chuno, Acche Chuno' ('pick the true, pick the good') campaign, fronted by Aamir Khan, seeks to motivate citizens to be more reflective about how they should vote. To facilitate easy access to information, the ad offers viewers a free SMS service that provides information about the criminal history, education, and assets of their would-be netas.

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The concern that animates this campaign is well-known: For a country abundant in talent, its representatives often seem sub-standard, or downright bad. Twenty-three per cent of the outgoing MPs have criminal cases against them. The 543 sitting MPs have a total of 333 serious criminal cases against them, with 229 of these charges being for violent crimes, such as murder, rape or armed robbery.

Though the compulsory public disclosure of the criminal record for all candidates is a recent initiative, we tried to reconstruct the historical record for Uttar Pradesh based on a survey carried out in 2003. According to that survey, 3 per cent of the top two candidates in the 1969 Assembly polls had a criminal record. By 1980, this was up to 7 per cent, by 1996, to 16 per cent. What is most worrying is that in the 2004 general elections, using data for Bihar and UP, we found that the winning candidate in a jurisdiction was 17 per cent more likely to have a criminal record than the others.

It is true that there are parts of rural India where social relations are so disastrous that one is not surprised if there is support for the occasional Robin Hood. However, the vast majority of criminal candidates seem to have acquired their criminal history nefariously rather than nobly. Starting from the presumption that the average Indian does not like criminals, two things are possible: either people are unaware of their candidates' criminal records or they favour criminals due to the other things that the criminals bring to the table.

Starting with the second theory first, one thing that many of the candidates are clearly selling is identity. In the 1996 UP Assembly elections, the share of the two upper caste parties (BJP and Congress) was only 39 per cent in constituencies with a higher than average share of low castes and 69 per cent in the areas where the share of the low castes was lower than the average. But in the 1980 Assembly elections in UP, these two parties won more of the vote in the low-caste dominated areas than elsewhere.

For well-known reasons — the rise of the SP and the BSP, the Mandal Commission Report, etc — voters from both high and low castes became much more identity conscious between 1980 and 1996, so that parties which offered the right caste credentials could get away with offering less in terms of candidate quality. It is only in areas where neither group was dominant that there continued to be a level playing field, and in these areas we would expect no change in the quality of the winning candidate.

This evidence, strikingly borne out by the data, tells us two things: that voters do care about criminality and candidate quality more generally, but they also vote for their identity (though they are less likely to do so when appealed not to). However, it also tells us that voters are knowingly voting for someone who is a criminal, because if they had no perception of criminality, there would be no explanation for the tendency of voters to vote against their "identity", when a significantly less criminal alternative from another caste is available.

Does that mean that voters know enough but don't care enough? During last year's Delhi elections, SNS, an NGO, filed a series of Right to Information cases in order to extract information about the performance of the sitting MLAs. This included how they had spent their annual Rs 2 crore development

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funds, as well as how often they had participated in the committees where they are supposed to represent their constituents. Hindustan combined this information with data from the mandatory disclosures by all candidates regarding criminal history, education, and personal assets, and printed the same in a concise format for a set of ten constituencies, in the week before the election.

A group of eight NGOs then distributed free copies of these newspapers in 200 polling stations, chosen by lottery to ensure that they were comparable to all the others where the newspapers were not distributed. While candidates with serious criminal records got about 9 per cent more votes in general, the newspaper distribution appears to have effectively cut the electorate's preference for criminals in half. However, one could make the case that this effect is the result of priming: it is conceivable that the newspaper campaign simply made people more sensitive to this issue.

Also, people seem to be suspicious of richer candidates: a 1 per cent increase in assets reduces a candidate's vote share by one percentage point, which might reflect either a sense of social distance (i.e. what can a rich man possibly know about my problems?) or the suspicion that the wealth is ill-gotten. But this effect is negated when voters are informed about a candidate's actual reported assets. The clincher, however, is the evidence about committee attendance. MLAs who regularly attended meetings saw a 5 per cent increase in vote share in polling stations where this information was made available, as compared to where it wasn't.

Knowing that information matters is, of course, just the first step. The challenge is how to get a country as big as India to pay attention. Perhaps initiatives such as the ADR campaign are sufficient, though it's possible that they rely too heavily on people being pro-active. What's clear is that this is a historic moment in the battle to make Indian democracy worth the billion hopes invested in it.

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