

The message from rural India



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI

New government must bring far-reaching changes in agriculture, increase farm incomes, fine-tune priorities

THE ELECTION RESULTS are out. No one has complained about the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) or Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT). The INDIA bloc that was alleging massive rigging when exit pollsters were predicting a huge win for NDA, did not speak a word about the manipulation of election results. Lesson: India's democratic process is reasonably good and foolproof. The Election Commission deserves some credit for that, especially for organising an election exercise at a scale the world has seen for the first time in history. As the Election Commission said, "*Parinaam main hi pramaan hai*" (The proof is in the results), so the EVM debate now should be buried forever.

Psephologists will keep debating the results and the factors behind them for several days. The exit pollsters have lost their credibility as the margin of error ranged from 20 to 30 per cent. Although the INDIA bloc could not muster the numbers required to form the government, it seems more than happy to pose a strong challenge as the Opposition. The BJP suffered badly as its tally dropped from 303 in 2019 to 240 in 2024. It will be heavily dependent on the NDA allies, especially Chandrababu Naidu and Nitish Kumar. The two might extract much more from the BJP than their absolute numbers suggest.

Everyone has an opinion on why the BJP's numbers fell, based on the prism from which they are looking. Was it the fear that the Constitution would be fundamentally changed, caste or religious factors, or economic factors like unemployment, high inflation, crony capitalism, widening inequalities, and the promises of "freebies" to women and youth or a combination of all of these?

It is hard to decipher the influence of all these factors. My take is simple: Look at where the BJP lost most, constituency by constituency. It would be interesting to note that the BJP's tally in rural-dominated constituencies came down from 253 in 2019 to 193 in 2024, a slide

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of 60 of the 63 seats the party lost in the election. It seems that rural India has sent a strong message to the BJP. More importantly, there are lessons for the new government as well as for those who have lost the elections.

Almost two-thirds of India still lives in rural areas, and their average per capita monthly expenditure was only Rs 3,773 in 2022-23 as per the NSO Household Expenditure Survey. Given the average family size of around 4.4, this translates to a family monthly expenditure of only Rs 16,600. Even if you adjust for inflation and meagre savings, broadly speaking, an average rural family's income is not more than Rs 20,000 per month. There is no doubt that the Narendra Modi government has introduced major changes in rural areas through its schemes to build toilets, houses (PM-AWAS), drinking water (har ghar, nal se jal), rural roads, and electricity supply. Even then, rural income levels remain low. And within the rural space, the income of agricultural households is even lower. It clearly shows that the rural economy has not been doing well. A good indicator of that can be tracked with the growth in real wages in rural areas, which have been largely stagnating or even marginally declined in the Modi government's second term.

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the well-being of the masses. Giving people 5 kg/per capita/month of free rice or wheat, is not enough. That's a dole. Instead, their real incomes must be raised substantially.

How do we do that? This is a lesson for all political parties who want people to gain from the development process or demand that the growth process become more inclusive. In this context, three things must be remembered.

One, there are too many people dependent on agriculture. They need to move to higher productivity, non-farm jobs. This could be in rural areas to build rural infrastructure, or outside the rural economy to build urban India. It would require massive investments in skill formation for higher productivity jobs. The industry needs to pitch in to train people for meaningful jobs.

Two, within agriculture, the focus needs to shift from basic staples, especially rice, which is in abundant supply, to high-value agriculture such as poultry, fishery, dairy and fruits and vegetables. High-value agriculture, being perishable, requires fast-moving logistics in a value chain approach — like the AMUL model in milk. The new government needs to chalk out a robust strategy for that.

Three, given the increasing number of climate change-induced extreme weather events (heat waves or flash floods), India needs to invest heavily in climate-smart agriculture, including agrivoltaics — solar as a third "crop" for farmers that can give regular monthly income even when other crops fail due to drought or floods.

We need an experienced and wise person heading agriculture and rural development in the Modi government. Shivraj Singh Chouhan, under whose leadership Madhya Pradesh agriculture registered the highest growth in the last 15 years or so, would perhaps be the best person for the job.

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Views are personal