

**Patterns of electoral support and party leadership
in India:**

Some Observations based on empirical research

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How people vote and how leaders build electoral support are questions that have always excited many social researchers and commentators on India politics. However, much of the writing in the field remains largely speculative based on the wisdom, personality and political inclination of the writers. The field studies, intensive and systematic they are, offer useful insights into the dynamics of Indian politics. Given the size, variability and plurality of the country, the generalizations that emerge from such studies tend to have limited application at the macro level. The empirical research carried out in 1960s and 1970s had thrown some light on the changing dimensions of the electoral politics and voting behaviour in that period.¹ The revival of the tradition of poll surveys and conducting them at all-India level by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies during the last decade has added a wealth of data and useful literature on understanding patterns of political behaviour in India. However, the analyses of the data has not moved much beyond reporting on “who voted whom”, going by certain important background characteristics such as education, age, gender, residence, caste, religion and income.² Probably we need to integrate these findings with the descriptive studies available in the field. But further effort is necessary to use the data to understand why people vote the way they do.

Although it has become a cliché to say that India is a paradox, it is worth repeating. India is praised for sustaining democratic politics over the past 60 years despite several odds. India is considered as a counter example to the prevailing theories of democracy that it can be sustained only in countries with high level of economic development and cultural uniformity. The nation has been credited with some outstanding leaders who led it through the infantile disorders and political storms. The people are also credited for showing reasonable levels of political awareness, maturity and ability to change governments through electoral means. At the same time, we hear a great deal about the political decay, crisis of governability looming large on the nation, decline of the quality of leadership over the years. Much of the discussion in the media as well as social research speak about how parties and leaders build electoral support on the basis of appeals to the identities of caste, religion, tribe, language and region. Faction, patronage and clientilism have been discussed for several decades now as the ways to build electoral support. In recent years the role of money, coercion and allurements in securing electoral victories are highlighted. The mysterious interplay of these factors is considered crucial in understanding the patterns of electoral support and political leadership.

Two paradoxes seem to be important in this context. Although the caste system, by and large, has broken down, castes ceased to be communities in the sense they were earlier,

¹ Myron Weiner and John Osgood Field on *Electoral Politics in Indian States* (in four volumes), Delhi: Manohar, 1974-77; Bashiruddin Ahmed, “Caste and Electoral Politics”, *Asian Survey*, 10(11), November 1970, pp.979-992; D.L. Sheth (ed.), *Citizens and Parties: Aspects of Competitive Politics in India*, Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1975; Samuel J. Eldersveld and Bashiruddin Ahmed, *Citizens and Politics: Mass Political Behaviour in India*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978; Paul R. Brass, “The 1984 Parliamentary Elections in Uttar Pradesh”, *Asian Survey*, 26(6), June 1986, pp.653-669; Ralph C. Meyer, “How Do Indians Vote?”, *Asian Survey*, 29(12), December 1989, pp.1111-1122.

² In recent years, books and writings have come out based on rich empirical data and theoretical depth and they offer us different perspectives and understand Indian politics and elections. Special issues of the *Economic and Political Weekly* on “Electoral politics in India, 1989-99”, 34(34 & 35), Aug-Sept. 1999, and on “National Election Study, 2004”, 39(51), December 2004 carried several articles explaining electoral politics at all-India level as well as in Indian states. Special issue of the *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, Vol.XV, Nos. 1&2, Jan.-June 2003, on ‘Political Parties and Elections in Indian States: 1990-2003’, carried several articles on electoral politics in Indian states as well as an article by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar on the changing dimensions of democratic politics in India. Paul Wallace and Ramashray Roy brought by one volume each on 1998 and 1999 elections, containing articles on electoral politics in major states.

caste cohesiveness or homogeneity has been diluted due to urbanization, migration and occupation mobility, caste is still considered an important factor in analyzing Indian politics. The same is the case with religion. Most political leaders indulge in all kinds of calculations in devising strategies to secure voters' support on the basis of caste and religion. Political analysts also presume that caste and religion are important factors in analyzing the electoral support for political parties and leaders and also dealing with electoral results. While analysis of political behaviour in the western countries usually revolves around classes, interests, ideology and party identification, in India, caste and religion occupy central place in analyzing electoral support. The problem is when we think of electoral verdicts over several decades we tend to attribute them to the larger national issue, performance of governments, waves and sympathy factors, and the charisma of the leaders or their failures.³ But when it comes to analyzing patterns of electoral support, caste and religion again occupy prime positions. Therefore, one question in this context could be: how salient is caste and religious identity in the voting decisions of the Indian voters? Under what conditions, at what level, to which extent or in what ways they become salient and under what conditions they triumph or get trumped. A second paradox is while the polity is getting more and more democratized, leadership in parties and government has been moving in the opposite direction – towards authoritarianism, if not autocracy. The emergence of one single indisputable party leader has become a major characteristic of Indian politics. Added to this is the dynastic succession in the parties, whose place is established not by fiat but through elections and popular consent.

An attempt is made in this paper to examine these two aspects by looking at the data emerged from several national level large sample surveys carried out by the Lokniti group of political scientists in India, located at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. The attempt is not find conclusive answers and establish causal relations, but to point out the complexities and to problematize certain commonly held beliefs about the patterns of political behaviour. These surveys include National Election Study, a post-poll survey, conducted in the year 2004 (NES), India component of the State of Democracy in South Asia survey (SDSA) conducted during 2004-05, and the India component of the world-wide survey of political parties sponsored by the International IDEA, conducted during 200-05. We use data from other opinion surveys on current thinking among the voters conducted during 2006.⁴ Basically descriptive statistics are used to understand some of the dimensions of voting behaviour, electoral support and political leadership. More sophisticated statistical analyses may yield further insights and inferences on this theme. While dealing with leadership the paper is mainly concerned with the top leadership of parties, in whom the power gets concentrated and with whom the party is identified in popular perception.

³ For instance, the victory of Mrs. Gandhi in 1971 was attributed to the Garibi Hatao slogan and the euphoria generated in the war for the independence of Bangladesh against Pakistan; the defeat of the Congress in 1977 was attributed to the resentment of the voters to the excesses of the Emergency and their enthusiasm to defend liberty and democracy in the country; the defeat of the Janata Party in 1979 was attributed to the leadership infighting in the party and its fragmentation; the victory of Rajiv Gandhi in 1984 was attributed to the sympathy wave due to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi; the defeat of Rajiv Gandhi in 1989 was attributed to the Bofors scandal and the demoralization of the Congress party; the victory of the Congress in 1991 was attributed to the sympathy factor in the wake of Rajiv's assassination, and so on.

⁴ For a note on methodology of the National Election Study, see, "National Election Study 2004: An Introduction", *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 18, 2004. A detailed note on survey methodology for State of Democracy in South Asia survey is available at www.democracy-asia.org. The opinion polls are the State of the Nation survey, January 2006 and the PM Survey, July 2006.

I. The nature of Indian electorate:

All of us agree that when we try to understand how voters decide and leaders forge electoral support, the context matters. It is often believed that, although the levels of illiteracy and poverty are high in India, the political literacy of the Indian voters is high and they make politically mature judgments. We may begin by asking some simple questions: How informed are the electorate in India? How much are they interested in politics? What are their levels of awareness? What are their cognitive abilities? What they do want from politics and politicians? In other words, what are the characteristics of the people or the publics that the parties and leaders in India have been dealing with? If we don't ask these questions at the outset, it is likely that we get caught in the trap of speaking in too general terms about the India or its leaders. Some times it may lead to either glorifying the people or leaders as defenders of democracy or denouncing them by attributing all the evils and decay to their behaviour.

The NES data show that 60 per cent of the respondents (N = 25754) have no interest in politics and public affairs, while 32 per cent expressed some interest and 8 per cent have great deal of interest. The proportion of females and non-literate people with no interest in politics or public affairs is very high – 72 per cent among women and 75 per cent among non-literates. Levels of literacy and interest in politics show high positive correlation. 58 per cent voters with college education reported some or great deal of interest in politics. The proportion of voters with no interest is the highest among the Scheduled Tribes, followed by Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes of people. Similarly, interest in politics increases with the rise in incomes, as 65 per cent of people with a monthly income of less than Rs.2000 (who constitute about 59 per cent of the sample) showing no interest in politics, while only 40 per cent of those in the top income bracket show no interest.

How informed are the electors about Indian politics and leaders? In every survey the field investigators return flabbergasted and frustrated at the no-responses to too many questions that elicit voters' views on political issues and ideas. For most questions that elicit an opinion from the voters and also require knowledge of the issues involved, the "no opinion" ranged from 15 to 30 per cent. A recent survey (July 2006) to elicit the perceptions on the Manmohan Singh government on its completion of two-years in office at the center throws up some interesting data. Only 64 per cent of the voters gave correct answer to the question "Who is the Prime Minister of our country?" The rest either could not give any name (22 per cent) or gave an incorrect answer (14 per cent). When we disaggregate the data we notice that 43 per cent of the rural people, 45 per cent of the dalits, 53 per cent of females, 56 per cent of agricultural workers, 60 per cent of the adivasis, 61 per cent of people with low-income and 77 per cent of non-literates either do not know the name of the Prime Minister or gave an incorrect name. This tells us some thing about the situation in which leaders function and build electoral support.

However, absence of interest in politics, deficiency of knowledge of political issues and events or lack of awareness about the man who presides over the government of the nation does not mean that people do not have opinion about politics or form of government. 80 per cent of the respondents in the NES 04 felt that their vote has effect on how things are run in the country. An overwhelming proportion of 88 per cent said that democracy is better than any other form of government. Only 4.5 per cent respondents believed that dictatorship is better; about 7 per cent felt that democracy or dictatorship makes no difference to them. Support for democracy is widespread across all classes and communities, males and females, rural and urban people, and elites as well as the masses. However, the proportion of people with no opinion about the form of

government is high among females (27%), non-literates (36%), SCs (25%), STs (26%), rural people (23%) and poor (28%) with a reported monthly income of less than Rs.1000. This poses another formidable question: many votes in India are not interested in politics and their levels of political awareness are low, but most of them want democracy and feel politically efficacious.

What are the issues that voters consider most important or as big issues in elections? The post-poll survey in 1996 shows that they attach high importance to problems such as unemployment (17.1%), poverty (11.5%), price rise (11.5%), drinking water (7.9%), corruption (7.9%), transport (4.0%), and electricity, medical facilities, education, housing, food and clothing, and so on. Most people in India seem to give priority to the fulfillment of their basic needs, unlike people in the postmodern societies of the industrialized west putting emphasis on the "postmaterialist" needs, as argued by Roland Inglehart (1997: 4-5).⁵

The open-ended question about the meaning of democracy in the SDSA survey (2004) reveals some interesting data about the perceptions of Indians on democracy. The question asked was: "Different people understand democracy differently. According to you, what is democracy?" The investigators were instructed to enter verbatim the first two responses given by the respondent. 55 per cent respondents have no view or opinion on this. The responses of those with a reply were then categorized under different broad categories. Half of the respondents understood democracy as equality and welfare: such as providing basic needs like food, clothing, housing, schools, health, drinking water, roads and bridges, electricity, communications, employment, social equality, gender equality, equality of opportunity, poverty reduction, etc. The proportion of respondents who understood democracy in this way is higher (about 60 per cent) among non-literates, semi-educated, and people with low-income.

There was another structured question in the SDSA survey on the perceptions about democracy. Among four response categories provided, voters were asked to choose the one they think the most essential characteristic of democracy. The response categories provided were: (a) Opportunity to change government through elections; (b) Freedom to criticize those in power; (c) Equal rights to every one; and (d) Providing basic necessities to every one. The data show that more than 42 per cent of the respondents consider provision of basic needs as the most essential characteristic of democracy. This proportion was as high as 57 per cent among non-literates, 46 per cent among villagers, 51 per cent among dalits, and 55 per cent among the low-income groups.

The overwhelming support for democracy and a belief that it is the instrument to fulfill their basic needs provides us an important clue to the nature of the Indian electorate and the consequent attempts of political leadership to forge electoral support in India. Political leaders of India are often criticized for resorting to populism. The crisis of Indian democracy and the decline of trust in parties and leaders is attributed to this phenomenon of leaders making tall promises to meet the basic needs of the people, and their inability to fulfill these promises because the state does not have sufficient financial resources to meet the promises. But what else do we expect the political leaders to do in such a situation? The survey data show a large proportion of the voters are concerned more about the local issues embedded in their day-to-day needs, rather than national issues. It does not necessarily mean that all these voters not concerned about national and larger issues that confront India. What it does mean that they attach priority to their immediate needs as far exercising their vote is concerned. They do not understand

⁵ Inglehart, Ronald (1997). *Modernization and Postmodernization*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

democracy in abstract terms or in terms of ensuring individual liberty, to which elites attach relatively higher importance at least notionally in understanding democracy. The concern of more than a majority of people for the fulfillment of their basic needs must be the determining factor in the way leaders conduct politics and build electoral support.

People want the governments to provide for their basic needs. That is where the role of local leaders also becomes important. People look upon them as the mediators between them and the government. They want to get a loan, a house site, admission in schools and other educational institutions, secure small employment, a ration card, or help in situations where they get involved in litigation or police cases. Voters tend to think that the leaders have an obligation to help them in their needs. This makes the leaders to be constantly on alert, available to hear people's grievances and render whatever help they can render, and appear that they are there to help the people. We saw that most elections at the national and provincial levels during the last several decades have been fought on the competing promises of the leaders to achieve economic development, eradication of poverty and unemployment, improve the living conditions of the people, and providing physical security of the individual. Even those leaders who have socio-economic transformation high on their agenda have to successfully do this transaction with the voters if they want to be successful in elections. Leaders who fail to do so risk losing or not gaining enough political salience and electoral support necessary to win power.

II. How Do Indians Vote?

This is the most difficult question to answer. But unless we have some satisfactory answer to this question our effort to understand how leaders build electoral support for themselves or for their parties would not be fruitful. Any textbook chapter on the determinants of voting behaviour in India would list caste, ethnicity and religion as important factors. So at one level it is assumed that people do bloc voting on the basis of some "pre-modern" identity. Most leaders do devise strategies and resort to all kinds of tactics to muster support from specific castes and communities. But the electoral verdicts in the general elections are often interpreted in terms of defeating the incumbent on the basis of its policies and performance. People seem to move on the issues that confront the nation and their lives rather than the sentimental identities of caste, religion, etc. The zone of overlap between caste/community solidarities and appeals on the one hand and the willingness of the leaders to address the problems of the people as perceived by people themselves by promising a better future is crucial for us in this context.

To examine this, I take three related questions asked in the NES 2004. One is: "In deciding whom to vote for, whose opinion mattered to you most?" The second question is agree/disagree question on a five-point scale on the statement: "One should vote in the same way one's caste/community votes." The third is a straight question: "While voting, what was the most important consideration for you?"

Table 1: **In deciding whom to vote for, whose opinion mattered to you most?**

	Voted own	Spouse and family members	Caste/ commu nity leaders	Friends/ Co- worker/ Colleague	Othe rs	% of total responde nts
Literacy						
Non literate	54.3	34.1	5.6	3.9	2.1	34.8
Up to primary	62.9	27.9	3.9	3.4	1.8	23.1
Up to matric	66.0	25.8	3.4	3.0	1.8	24.3
College and above	73.0	19.9	2.3	2.8	2.0	17.8

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Gender						
Male	70.8	18.5	4.5	4.3	1.9	54.0
Female	52.8	39.3	3.7	2.2	1.9	46.0
Locality						
Urban	67.1	26.2	2.3	2.6	1.8	21.6
Rural	61.2	28.7	4.6	3.6	1.9	78.4
Occupation						
Higher professionals	77.9	16.8	1.8	1.3	2.2	3.5
Lower professionals	75.4	16.7	3.1	3.1	1.7	12.4
Traditional service	64.9	25.2	5.6	2.6	1.8	1.9
Workers	65.4	24.1	4.1	3.9	2.4	11.5
Framers	61.2	27.8	5.4	4.1	1.4	20.6
Agricultural workers	62.1	26.4	5.5	4.2	1.7	21.0
Other (include housewives)	54.9	37.7	2.7	2.3	2.3	29.0
Caste						
Upper caste	65.0	27.5	2.8	2.8	2.0	16.1
Peasant castes	60.6	33.2	2.1	2.9	1.2	8.3
Upper OBCs	63.5	26.0	4.8	3.4	2.3	20.0
Lower OBCs	64.3	27.0	3.5	2.9	2.4	15.8
SC	62.5	26.4	5.9	3.7	1.5	15.5
ST	55.9	31.4	5.8	5.4	1.4	7.8
Others	61.2	30.0	3.4	3.3	2.0	16.4
Religion						
Hindu	62.9	27.7	4.2	3.4	2.0	80.1
Muslim	58.8	30.8	4.2	4.0	2.2	11.1
Christian	72.5	21.4	3.1	2.1	0.8	3.2
Sikh	53.4	39.4	3.4	2.9	0.9	2.5
Buddhist	65.3	28.6	3.6	0.6	1.8	1.3
Jain	64.6	31.6	--	3.8	--	0.3
Parsi	51.9	33.3	3.7	11.1	--	0.1
Other	61.0	31.4	1.9	3.5	2.2	1.4
Interest in politics						
No interest	58.1	32.9	4.1	3.0	1.9	59.3
Some interest	68.1	22.3	4.2	3.9	1.5	32.8
Great deal	77.2	14.7	2.5	3.2	2.4	7.9
Membership in political party						
Yes	67.5	23.5	3.6	4.0	1.3	14.5
No	62.2	28.5	4.1	3.2	2.0	85.5
Efficacy						
Vote has effect	67.3	24.6	3.6	2.9	1.5	80.0
Has no effect	54.7	33.4	5.0	4.2	2.8	20.0
Perception of democracy						
Democracy is better	65.6	25.8	3.7	3.2	1.7	88.2
Dictatorship is better	62.6	28.2	3.3	4.5	1.4	4.5
Makes no difference	52.6	32.6	6.3	6.2	2.3	7.2
Total	62.5	28.2	4.1	3.4	1.9	100.0

For the first question, about 63 per cent of the respondents said that they have voted on their own; opinion of spouse and family members mattered most to about 28 per cent of the respondents; opinion of friends, colleagues and co-workers was most important for about 3 per cent; while only 4 per cent respondents reported that they went by the opinion of caste/community leaders (Table 1). The proportion of those who voted according to their opinion is more among highly educated, professionals, males, urban people, upper castes and OBCs, Christians, who speak English well and those in higher income groups. Likewise it is also high among those who have greater interest in politics, who felt their vote has effect on how things are run in the country, felt that democracy is better, and have greater exposure to the media. However, this variation is not accounted much by the variation in the importance attached to the opinion of the caste/community leaders, but by the importance attached to the opinion of spouse and other family members.

The picture gets further complicated when we look at data for the third question: "While voting, what is the most important consideration for you?" The response categories provided were (a) candidate; (b) party; (c) caste/community; and (d) other. Overall, only 10 per cent of the respondents said that caste/community is the most important consideration. Half of the respondents go by party and one-third go by candidate. A somewhat higher proportion of non-literates (15%), agricultural workers and farmers (13%), dalits (15%), adivasis (12%), and OBCs (11%), non-English knowing persons (13%), low income groups (12%), and people who think that their vote would have no effect (16%) and no interest in public affairs (11%) think that caste/community is the most important consideration in exercising the vote (Table 2).

While taking a decision on whom to vote, not many people seek or go by the opinion of the caste or community leaders. This finding may not pose a big difficulty since it is possible to distinguish between attaching utmost importance to the opinion of caste or community leaders and voting on caste solidarities. However, the data on the question of most important consideration poses a difficulty, where only 10% of voters say that caste or community is the most important consideration in their voting decision.

When the respondents were asked in a separate question whether one should vote in the same way one's caste/community votes, 45 per cent of the respondents said that they should vote the same way one's caste/community people vote. More than a majority of those who felt that one should vote in the same way as one's caste/community votes said that they have voted on their own. Many of those who say that a person should vote the same way as the caste or community votes do not think that caste is the most important consideration for them in exercising the vote (see tables 3a and 3b).⁶

⁶ However, the proportion of voters who gave top most consideration to caste or community is higher among those who agreed that a person has to vote the same way his/her caste or community votes than those who disagreed with the statement.

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Table 2: While voting, what is the most important consideration for you?

	Candidate	Party	Caste / Communi ty	Something else	% of total responde nts
Literacy					
Non literate	27.2	51.0	15.3	6.5	33.3
Up to primary	32.1	53.1	9.9	4.9	23.2
Up to matric	38.3	48.0	8.6	5.1	24.9
College and above	44.3	47.1	4.1	4.5	18.6
Gender					
Male	35.4	51.2	8.7	4.6	55.3
Female	32.9	48.4	12.3	6.4	44.7
Locality					
Urban	39.0	49.6	6.2	5.3	22.0
Rural	33.0	50.1	11.5	5.5	78.0
Occupation					
Higher professional	45.2	47.0	3.3	4.5	3.6
Lower professional	38.4	50.9	6.2	4.5	12.8
Traditional service	40.7	46.2	8.9	4.2	2.0
Workers	33.4	51.8	9.3	5.6	11.7
Farmers	33.4	48.7	12.7	5.2	20.6
Agricultural workers	28.4	53.3	13.2	5.1	20.7
Other occupation	36.0	47.9	9.7	6.4	28.6
Caste community					
Upper caste	37.4	50.5	6.4	5.7	16.6
Peasant castes	37.6	49.6	8.6	4.3	8.1
Upper OBCs	34.0	49.2	12.3	4.5	19.8
Lower OBCs	36.3	48.9	9.3	5.5	15.8
SC	27.3	52.4	15.1	5.2	15.6
ST	29.4	51.4	12.4	6.8	7.8
Others	36.9	48.6	8.3	6.2	16.3
Religion					
Hindu	34.1	50.2	10.4	5.3	80.1
Muslim	35.1	49.3	9.7	5.9	11.1
Christian	37.7	46.8	8.7	6.8	3.3
Sikh	36.1	47.6	9.3	7.0	2.4
Buddhist	34.1	47.1	14.9	3.9	1.2
Jain	31.2	61.0	6.5	1.3	0.3
Parsi	37.0	44.4	14.8	3.7	0.1
Others	30.4	53.2	9.2	7.2	1.4
Income					
Up to Rs.1000	31.5	51.2	11.8	5.5	34.6
Rs.1001-Rs.2000	32.5	49.7	12.4	5.3	24.4
Rs.2001-Rs.3000	34.7	48.2	11.5	5.7	13.2
Rs.3001-Rs.5000	38.2	50.2	6.9	5.1	14.8
Rs.5001-Rs.10000	40.0	49.6	5.4	5.0	8.9
Rs.10001and above	43.1	47.0	4.6	5.3	4.2
Ability to speak and understand English					
Very well	30.2	56.9	8.4	4.5	19.2
Little	40.8	48.2	6.6	4.4	25.8
Not at all	31.0	49.2	13.3	6.5	55.0
Interest in politics					
No interest	33.7	48.9	11.4	6.1	58.6
Some interest	36.7	50.9	8.2	4.2	33.4
Great deal	32.0	55.1	7.7	5.1	8.1
Membership in political party					
Yes	35.0	56.0	6.6	2.4	14.9
No	34.3	49.1	10.7	5.9	85.1
Efficacy					
Vote has effect	35.5	51.6	8.1	4.7	80.5
Has no effect	32.1	44.7	16.0	7.2	19.5
Perception of democracy					
Democracy is better	36.0	50.9	8.6	4.5	88.4
Dictatorship is better	37.9	43.0	11.3	7.9	4.5
Makes no difference	30.5	41.6	18.2	9.8	7.1
Total	34.3	50.0	10.3	5.4	100.0

Table 3a: Perceptions on bloc voting and whose opinion mattered most

One should vote the same way as one's caste/community does	Voted own	Spouse and family members	Caste/ community leaders	Friends/Co-worker/ Colleague	Others	% of total respondents
Fully disagree	75.9	19.1	1.0	2.2	1.8	41.1
Somewhat disagree	64.6	27.5	3.0	3.4	1.4	14.0
Somewhat agree	53.8	34.4	5.8	4.9	1.1	15.4
Fully agree	52.8	32.9	8.2	4.1	2.0	29.5
Total	62.5	28.2	4.1	3.4	1.9	100.0

Table 3b: Perceptions on bloc voting and most important consideration

One should vote the same way as one's caste/community does	Candidate	Party	Caste / Community	Something else	Total
Fully disagree	38.4	52.6	4.0	5.0	41.5
Somewhat disagree	39.8	49.2	6.3	4.8	14.0
Somewhat agree	35.1	47.4	11.8	5.6	15.4
Fully agree	27.4	47.1	20.4	5.1	29.1
Total	34.3	50.0	10.3	5.4	100.0

How do we explain this apparently paradoxical position? Are we to infer from this that many voters, even while agreeing notionally that one should vote the same way his/her caste or community votes, do not in fact do so when it comes to actual voting? They either vote on their own or do not consider caste or community as the most important consideration. Are the leaders wrong in thinking that people vote according to the caste and community sentiment? Is it a futile exercise on their part to forge support on caste or community appeal? Or is it that such voters internalize caste/community sentiment so much so that they cease to think that he/she is not guided by the caste/community sentiment and instead imagines that he/she is voting on one's own or giving consideration to candidatures and party instead of one's own caste and community?

Before we delve further on this matter let us see how people actually voted in the latest parliamentary elections. Researchers and commentators on elections have been saying that certain parties in certain states enjoy the support of a large chunk of voters of specific castes and communities. To understand what happens in the electoral domain, let us see how voters actually voted in 2004 parliamentary elections in some of the states of India (see table 4).

We notice that a large chunk of voters in a state do actually vote for a certain party. They do so consistently over several elections, when we look at the distribution of votes in the earlier elections. There may be some variation from election to election due to a variety of factors, such as alliances, leadership factor, selection of candidates to contest in elections, etc. But these parties do enjoy a minimum base among these social groups. For example BSP enjoys overwhelming support from the dalits and the SP from Yadavas and Muslims in UP, Lok Jan Shakti Party among dalits in Bihar, Shiromani Akali Dal from Jat Sikhs in Punjab, Nationalist Congress Party among Marathas in Maharashtra, Congress among Reddys and TDP among Kammas in AP, Pattali Makkal Katchi among Vanniyars in Tamil Nadu, and so on. In fact, in popular perception these parties are known as the parties of these communities and the top party leader or core leaders belong to this caste or community.

Table 4: Who voted whom

Andhra Pradesh (N = 1292)				
Caste/Community	Congress+	TDP	BJP	Others
Reddys	69.8	21.7	5.7	2.8
Kammas	31.0	51.7	17.2	--
Kapus	46.9	35.7	12.2	5.2
OBCs	52.0	37.1	7.6	3.3
SCs	71.6	17.4	7.0	4.0
Muslims	67.7	21.9	9.5	1.0

Karnataka (N = 1398)			
Caste/Community	Congress	BJP	JD(S)
Upper castes	26.4	64.0	4.5
Vokkaligas	48.0	22.3	26.7
Lingayats	30.7	59.1	2.3
Other OBCs	41.7	35.3	15.2
SC	48.5	34.9	3.9
Muslims	61.7	23.3	12.0

Tamil Nadu (N = 753)						
Caste/Community	Congress	DMK	MDMK	PMK	BJP	ADMK
Upper castes	5.7	31.4	2.9	2.9	5.7	45.7
Thevars	28.7	18.4	--	3.4	2.3	46.0
Gounders	26.2	11.9	17.9	6.0	4.8	29.8
Madars	14.3	31.0	9.5	4.8	4.8	33.3
Vanniyars	14.0	15.0	7.5	30.8	7.5	23.4
Other OBCs	24.6	25.4	8.2	3.0	3.7	30.6
Chakkiliyars & Pallars	6.9	20.8	7.9	11.9	3.0	40.6
Other SCs	21.9	21.9	3.1	--	3.1	40.6
Muslims	44.4	37.0	--	3.7	--	11.1

Maharashtra (N = 1261)				
Caste/Community	Congress	BJP	SHS	NCP
Upper castes	14.9	50.6	16.1	11.5
Maratha	5.5	19.2	38.8	28.2
Kunbi	14.9	23.1	30.6	6.6
OBCs	19.0	32.6	20.1	14.7
SCs	43.0	8.2	8.2	18.4
Muslims	48.9	3.0	6.8	22.6

Bihar (N=972)					
Caste/Community	Congress	RJD	BJP	JD(U)	LJSP
Upper castes	7.6	10.3	32.7	35.0	4.0
Yadava	5.7	36.1	9.8	8.2	20.5
Kurmi+Koeri	4.0	5.9	9.9	59.4	6.9
Other OBCs	3.6	16.0	19.1	21.3	10.2
SCs	9.1	24.0	11.6	20.7	7.4
Muslims	16.8	34.3	7.0	2.8	26.6

Uttar Pradesh (N = 1454)				
Caste/Community	Congress	BJP	BSP	SP
Upper castes	12.2	54.3	3.6	13.2
Yadava	6.9	4.6	9.2	70.8
Other OBCs	16.2	28.7	15.7	24.1
Jatav	4.0	1.3	85.3	7.6
Other SCs	15.0	10.3	43.0	17.8
Muslims	13.9	2.6	10.0	48.7

Punjab (N = 717)				
Caste/Community	Congress	BJP	SAD	BSP
Upper castes	33.1	24.5	26.6	2.2
OBCs	28.6	14.3	35.7	3.6
SC	41.3	6.0	19.3	26.0
Jat Sikhs	29.3	15.6	39.8	1.2
Other Sikhs	31.4	19.6	25.5	7.8
Muslims	66.7	11.1	22.2	--

We notice that people of a specific caste or community develop an identity with a party at the provincial or national level. Often this develops because of the top leader or the leaders who matter a great deal in the party. Since most castes in India are state-specific (which in turn are organized on the basis of language), the pattern of caste support varies from state to state. Identification of a party with a specific caste leadership is a long drawn social and political process, whose manifestation we see at the time of elections. Hence it becomes difficult to say, even for the voter, whether caste/community or party or candidate is the most important consideration. In elections, generally, competing parties field candidates from the same caste / community, which is numerically predominant or socially dominant. But voters of a caste / community tend to vote to that party with which they are identified at the provincial level, regardless of the fact whether a candidate in that constituency belongs to that caste/community or not. For example, the most Reddys in Andhra Pradesh vote for the Congress party. Even if the TDP fields a Reddy person and the Congress a non-Reddy person as the candidate in a particular constituency, the Reddy voters would vote for the non-Reddy candidate rather than the Reddy candidate of the TDP because they see in Congress a Reddy-dominated party. Similarly, in UP the dalits vote for the BSP candidate in a constituency even if the BSP candidate is a non-dalit and the candidate of the rival party belongs to the one of the dalit communities. The dalit voters identify with the party and its top leader, Mayawati, and give less importance to who the candidate is at the constituency level. So they vote for the party or for the party chief, and not the local candidate. In such situation the vote for the party is in fact a vote for the caste / community. This is true of several parties and leaders, such as the SP led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, RJD led by Laloo Prasad Yadav, Janata Dal led by Deve Gowda in Karnataka or the PMK led by Ramdoss in Tamil Nadu. Where the preference for the party and the social background of the candidate happens to be the same there would be no difficulty at all. Caste, candidate and party merge happily, and the voter could claim that he or she is voting for the candidate or the party.

Bloc voting appears to be high among Muslims. In states where party alliances contested in elections, the Muslim vote appears to be heavily skewed in one-direction. In Tamil Nadu it is more than 80 per cent; and in Maharashtra it is more than 70 per cent. It is generally believed that voting according to the directions given by the community leaders is high among Muslims. But the NES data do not support such a presumption. Only 3.1 per cent of Muslim voters said that the opinion of the community leaders matters to them most, which is less than the average for the total sample.

From this, however, we cannot jump to the conclusion that leaders and parties have fixed electoral constituencies or that Indian electorate is segmented on the lines of caste or community. Firstly, while we find that in cases of some castes more than majority of a caste or community vote for a particular leader, and some times continuously over the years, there are significant minorities who do not go along with the majority of the community. In dividing electoral strategies, leaders of parties who draw support heavily from one caste or community do not ignore the importance of these minorities in other castes and communities.

Secondly, we find strong divisions among several castes and communities, which do not constitute the core of any one particular party. For example the Kapus and OBCs are divided between the Congress and the TDP in Andhra Pradesh; the Lingayats between the Congress and the BJP in Karnataka; the non Yadava OBCs between the four parties in the electoral arena in Uttar Pradesh; or the Marathas between the Shiv Sena and the NCP

in Maharashtra. So to imagine that people of different castes and communities in India move like one great stream behind one leader or one party is obviously false.

Thirdly, we notice a great deal of fluidity and shifts in electoral support from different castes and communities to particular leaders and parties. Even in states that are perceived to be highly caste-ridden, the cleavages are not permanent. The proportions of vote a party receives keep changing from election to election. The State of the Nation survey (January 2006) reveals that in the last few elections about 32 per cent of the voters voted for different parties. The proportions are fairly uniform across all categories of people; the proportions of people voting for different parties are slightly higher among those with higher education and higher occupations.

Fourthly, there are too many floating or uncommitted votes that could alter the fortunes of the leaders and candidates even after the election process begins. The NES 2004 shows that of the respondents who voted in the polls (23677), about half of them made up their mind about whom to vote for before the election campaign began. But 32 per cent of them made up their mind a day or two before the day of polling or on the day of polling. And the rest made up their mind during the period of election campaign. In a situation where a few percentage points in electoral support catapult a leader into power or deprive it, the proportion of floating or undecided voters is not insignificant.

However, one caveat is in order here. When we say that people of different castes are divided among different parties, we are going by the grouping of castes under SCs, OBCs, peasant communities, etc. Such a distribution is possible while we pool respondents of various castes under one such category. But if we disaggregate these caste groupings and see how respondents of each caste behaved we might get different results. It is possible that many or most of the members of one OBC caste are with one party, while many or most of the members of another OBC caste are with another party. So we have to be careful while interpreting the data in this regard. But to do that, we need larger samples from different castes to make any valid and meaningful conclusions about the influence of caste on voting behaviour.

In the light of these observations, let us examine the responses of voters about whose opinion mattered most in voting decisions from another angle. About 60 per cent of Indians say that they are voting on their own, and if we interpret voting on the opinion of spouse and family members as voting on their own, we have to say that a great many are deciding whom to vote either on their own, whether individually or as a family. About half of the people understand democracy in terms of fulfilling their basic needs. A great many people look upon leaders as agents to attend their immediate problems, especially to secure their immediate and basic needs. But 45 per cent feel that one should vote in the same way as the caste or community does. How do we explain these apparently contradictory responses? Is the caste or community sentiment only a veil for calculated self-interest?

We may think that voting on caste lines and voting on the basis of self-interest are opposed to each other. But such a contradiction may not be there in reality, if we see the voting decisions as the outcome of the overlapping factors: calculation of personal interests, caste solidarities, factional affiliations, preferences for the candidate and patronage. A successful leader could be the one who knows how these multiple factors are interlocked and mobilizes support to produce a desired outcome. I think the group identity is important in this context. Voters often live as part of a group, and this group may cut across castes, classes and religious identities. In competitive politics, most villages and mohallas tend to be organized around groups and the individual seeks to ensure his security or access welfare benefits as member of a group. Similarly, identification with a leader – either at the local level or at the provincial level – tends to

be important in voting decision. If these two categories are included in the response categories for the questions – whose opinion mattered most or what is the most important consideration in voting decisions – the results might be significantly different. Then the proportions of people saying yes to party and candidate may go down drastically.

III. Patterns of leadership

We have seen that more than a majority of voters say that have voted on their own. Similarly many voters say that that party and candidate are the most important consideration in exercising their vote. However, it is not clear from this data what role the leader or leaders of the party play in influencing the voting decisions. In a situation where parties are identified with the personality of the supreme leader and such a leader handpicks the candidates, party and candidate could be a euphemism for the leader.

Over the past few decades we are a witness to the phenomena of the rise of powerful leaders in various parties. What we see is not mere centralization of power, but concentration of power in one individual in the party. Most parties are leader centred, whether these parties are national or provincial, old or new. Reference to a party usually means reference to the supreme leader of the party. Thus, the terms party and leader have become coterminous. Sonia Gandhi in the Congress, Mayawati in the BSP, Sharad Pawar in the NCP, Mulayam Singh in the SP, Laloo Prasad in the RJD, Bal Thackeray in Shiv Sena, Jayalalithaa in the AIADMK, Karunanidhi in DMK, Naveen Patnaik in the BJD and so on. The entire party, including the legislative wing, revolves around him or her. When the party is in power more often than not the same leader wields power both in the party and government. The leader is the chief motivator, main campaigner and star performer for the party. The chief's word is always final. There is little scope for disagreeing or questioning the wisdom of the chief. No one can hope to survive in the party by opposing the top leader. Party chiefs are like modern princes, if not more than that. Exceptions do exist, but they are few. For this section, I rely more on the information collected as part of the political parties research project to explain how parties and leaders function in India and build electoral support, win power and continue with it.

Most liberal and social democratic parties in India are known not by its programmes and policies, but by its popular leaders. Many parties do not have any policy document. The speeches and views of the top party leader, who is usually the founder of the party, are considered the policies of the party. Of course, the party leader does consult other leaders and "feel the pulse of people" before making policy statements. The ability of the leader to feel the people's pulse is more important than the advise of the lower order leaders. So what the top leader says is the policy of the party. The party `supremos` have absolute authority to make changes in policy position in response to the exigencies of the situation.

Party leaders control huge funds. Most parties spend huge amounts on election campaign. The one who contributes or mobilizes big amounts for party assumes importance in parties, as is the case in parties anywhere in the world. But what might distinguish the Indian parties is that the leaders are hardly accountable to any one in the party or outside, leading to several adverse consequences to the parties and politics of the country. One or two persons who are close confidants of the party's supreme leader usually control party funds.

(i) Preference for a strong leader

How could such leaders emerge? One question asked in the SDSA would be helpful in this context. Using a five-point scale, the respondents were asked to give their opinion on how they think the country should be governed. One of the statements is: "We should have a strong leader who does not have to bother about elections". Those who strongly agree and agree are combined and shown in table 5.

Table 5: Who should govern? (Respondents who do not have any opinion are omitted)

The country should be governed by ...	Agree
A strong leader	43.8
Representatives chosen in elections	77.8
Army	18.4
King	13.4
Religious leaders	14.2

Table 6: "We should have a strong leader who does not have to bother about elections"

	Agree
Education	
Non-literate	48.3
Below primary	49.6
Middle school	44.5
Secondary school	39.8
Graduate and above	34.1
Religion and caste	
Hindu	42.5
Upper caste	40.6
Peasant castes	33.3
OBCs	43.0
SCs	46.9
STs	47.5
Muslim	47.7
Christian	60.5
Buddhist	58.7
Sikh	27.4
Others	50.0
Income	
Lowest income quintile	50.1
2 nd income quintile	42.8
3 rd income quintile	43.5
4 th income quintile	42.7
Highest income quintile	40.2
Closeness to any party	
Yes	40.8
No	47.7
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	
Very Satisfied	42.4
Somewhat satisfied	41.3
Somewhat dissatisfied	40.1
Totally dissatisfied	47.9
Trust in political parties	
Great deal	44.9
Some	39.7
Not very much	37.8
None at all	49.0
Elites and masses	
Elites	40.6
Masses	44.1
Total	43.8

More than three fourths said that representatives chosen in elections should govern the country. Not many preferred the rule by army, king or religious leaders. But nearly 44 per cent of the respondents also felt that the country needs a strong leader who does not have to bother elections. However, the proportion of the respondents who agreed with the statement is nearly half among non-literates, people with low income, those who are totally dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy and have no trust in political parties (table 6).

How much weight a leader will have on the decisions of the voters? One question asked in the NES 2004, where respondents were asked whether it would have any effect on the voting decision if Sonia Gandhi were not the leader of the Congress, may provide some clue? 20 per cent of the respondents said that such a situation would have affected their voting decision. The proportion of the respondents whose decision would have affected was more among those who have great interest in politics, are members of a political party, and think that dictatorship is better for the country. We may surmise that the proportion of respondents with such a response would be more in the state parties, where the sway of the leader in the party is total, unlike the Congress which has too many leaders and pretenders at the provincial level around whom electoral support is mobilized.

(ii) How are leaders chosen?

The survey of parties done as part of the political parties project shows that the top leader in most parties are normally chosen by general consent, rather than contest. The top leader, called differently in different parties, assumes the position by virtue of his or her role in founding the party, or the popularity, reputation, image and appeal they have among the electorate or both. It is a kind of natural choice. Most of them are perceived as born leaders. There would be rarely contenders for this post. Even where an election takes place at the party convention or conference, the election is routinely held. A general consensus prevails in the party – among members, activists and other leaders – on the choice of the top or the supreme leader, and everyone knows in the party and outside. Where the chief of the party cannot or does not wish to assume any formal party position, his or her nominee would fill the post (as in Shiv Sena, for example). Only the communist parties seem to be an exception, which are more prone to oligarchic pattern of leadership.

When it comes to filling the highest decision making bodies, the party chief picks up leaders who have considerable popular following in their respective areas, who have a long association with the party, who show promise as future leaders or who are confidants or advisors. Different leaders either in their individual capacity or as leaders of factions compete for gaining the confidence of the leader. In so far as the factions do not question the supremacy of the chief but are only in competition with each other to occupy as much space as possible in the decision making bodies, it is all the more advantageous for the party chief to perpetuate his/her position in the party. A judicious balancing of factions in the committees would ensure the supreme leader's authority by making him or her to appear to be standing above the factions, while retaining a role in mediating between factions and settling disputes amicably. In parties where some members of the top executive body are elected, that can be done only with the prior approval of the party chief.

(iii) How candidates in elections are chosen?

In most parties, the top leader has the final say in choosing party nominees in elections. But the nomination process is usually prolonged and crucial for the leadership. A small group of leaders nominated by the top leader – either in a formal body or informally – supervises this process. Consultations and discussions with provincial and local leaders (depending on whether the party is national level party or a state party) take place to ensure a proper balance among different sections of the society, what is known as “social balancing”. Different factions within the party are also given due consideration at the time of selections. Some leaders had developed a system of gathering information through internal surveys on the potential and possible candidates and their suitability. It is not uncommon for leaders in power to use police and intelligence agencies to get confidential reports on the credentials of the aspirants or people’s perceptions about them.

The single most important characteristic of a leader to secure the ticket seems to be winning chances of the candidate in elections. Indian party leaders call it winnability. Winnability in turn depends on a combination of factors: image of the candidate in the constituency, following among and acceptability to the rank and file at the relevant level, and of increasing importance in recent years, is the ability to bear the high election campaign expenses. The first past the post system makes the top leader to choose candidates who are well connected to the constituency and have considerable following among people at the constituency level. Usually persons who are prominent in their respective castes and communities are chosen for the nomination. The top leaders cannot be very whimsical, because they do not want to take the risk of losing the seat, especially when the political competition is intense, whether in particular constituencies or in general.

(iv) Members and leaders

Most leaders in India preside over parties with huge membership. All parties in India are mass parties and are open to anyone who seeks entry. In terms of membership composition they are heterogeneous, secular and pluralistic, largely reflecting the character of the Indian society. Thus, most parties are catch-all types, and the leaders perceive their parties in such a manner. In parties that are oriented to a particular religion, caste or ethnicity membership would be mainly from that social category of people. NES 2004 shows that 14.5 per cent of the voters in India are party members, which would roughly works out to 90 millions. However, the claims of the party leaders, if we total the membership of various parties as claimed by the leaders, far exceed this figure. Nevertheless, the extent of membership in political parties is high when compared with the western democracies (see table 7).

*Politics, Bangalore, 2-3 November 2006 CSES-iACT International Conference on
Election Systems and Electoral*

Table 7: Party membership and support basis of political parties in India (as claimed by the leaders)

Name of party	Membershi p
All India Anna DMK (ADMK)	10,000,000
Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	5,400,000
Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	1,000,000
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	30,000,000
Communist Party of India (CPI)	543,000
Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM)	796,000
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	7,500,000
Indian National Congress (INC)	50,000,000
Indian National Lok Dal (INLD)	2,000,000
Kerala Congress (Mani) (KEC)	200,000
Lok Jan Shakti Party (LJSP)	2,000,000
Mizo National Front (MNF)	400,000
Muslim League (MUL)	500,000
Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK)	6,000,000
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	2,800,000
Shiv Sena (SHS)	5,000,000
Samajwadi Party (SP)	4,000,000
All India Trinamool Congress (TC)	2,900,000
Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	7,713,000
Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS)	1,250,000

Note: Only parties that gave membership particulars and whose membership is more than one lakh members are reported here.

We know that people become members of parties due to a variety of motivations and needs: security, ego or ideological needs, or for economic benefits or just for the sake of curiosity and a desire for new experience. The ability of the party leader or leaders to “attract” or inspire people to join the party is also important. A major chunk of party members find their way into political parties through the influence of family members and relatives who are party leaders, activists and supporters. Some families have generational affiliation to a political party, usually referred in party circles as “party families”. A person born and brought in those families “naturally” becomes member of that party. The most important function the top party leader is to motivate the party members and activists to work for the party, especially during the elections. Victory or defeat of a leader usually depends not on how many members the party boasts of in a constituency, but on how vigorously they work for the success of the party and the party candidate.

Very few members work for the party or the leader altruistically. Most expect or receive one or other kind of benefits. One important benefit people expect from the party is security – security of life, liberty (to go about one's own work, job or occupation) and property.⁷ In most villages and towns people identify themselves with a group or faction led by a person capable of providing such a security. Here rival factions exist, and these factions could be on the basis of caste or personalities. Social cleavages manifest as factions. Parties provide respectable cloaks and enable these groups to establish vertical and horizontal linkages. If fulfills the solidarity needs of the individual and gives a sense of confidence and assurance that there are people who would come to rescue when in trouble or just to keep the rivals at bay. Factional and party membership overlap to such an extent that if one faction supports one party the rival faction sails with another party. If we ask a person as to why he is "with" a particular party, he would simply reply that because his "group" or "people" are with that party. The compulsions of group solidarity are often so significant that when a larger number of people in the group feel that they should leave a party for certain reasons, the group leader has no option but to leave it.

This solidarity need is again linked to some material benefit. Thus when a member says that party identity is important for him, he may be looking at his party association as means to fulfill his personal or economic needs. Most members are not interested in party positions, aspire for higher social status or bother about community uplift. They want the party leaders to attend to their personal problems and get a few things done for them. We saw in the earlier section that people perceive their immediate problems as the big problems facing the nation. This is true also of party members and activists. They get "closer" to the party for the sake of securing such benefits – admissions to their children/relatives in educational institutions, hospital or a hostel run by communities or the government; employment, help in property transactions, to secure a loan, a house-site or a plot of land or to get some welfare benefit from the government. As governments implement several welfare schemes, party becomes a route to gain access to them. It is not that party members alone get these benefits, but membership provides greater access to government offices than what is likely for an ordinary individual. One important activity of parties at local level is to see that a party member or his family member or his property are not attacked; they are not implicated in false cases by police, or to get them released when detained or get bail when charged; to extend help in police cases or in litigation and trial. Those members who are placed in a better economic position look for higher benefits: award of contracts of the public works, permits for trade, business, a petrol station or gas dealership, etc. or to become a candidate for the elected or nominated positions. Some party leaders said that membership tends to increase rapidly when a party is in power or when people see the possibility of it coming to power; and it declines when out of power or its position becomes weak. One leader of the AGP observed that parties face a predicament: parties in power find it difficult to meet the flood of expectations from party workers; parties out of power find it difficult to keep the flock together as they are under pressure of shifting loyalties.

(v) Three explanations for leader-centrism

Three plausible explanations could be offered for the emergence of single supreme leader who exercises rather untrammelled authority in the party and government – a cultural explanation, crisis of governability explanation, and a functional explanation. Firstly, such leaders could be the result of the cultural values prevalent in India, where people look for

⁷ One Shiv Sena leader said that his party provides to its members security from goons, police and rival political activists.

symbols of supreme power when they make voting decisions or decide on their political preferences. The image of a party leader is similar to that of a family head who takes care of the people like members of his or her family. It is all well and good if the leader is of the philosopher-king type; but even if the leader is made in the Machiavellian mould it does not matter. What matters is that the leader should appear to be extraordinary, either due to imagined abilities or proven capacity. Secondly, supreme leaders arise partly because people perceive them as an antidote to the erosion of ethics in politics and see them as instruments of good government. When people think that politics have fallen to a point beyond repair, they might look towards a supreme leader who is believed to have the capacity to deliver on his or her promises. A third plausible explanation could be offered in terms of the functional utility of such a leader to the party. Without a strong leader a party may not be successful in elections. It has been seen that parties that do not have a strong leader give rise to such a leader in course of time who can lead it to electoral success. In the absence of the institutionalization of arrangements for conflict resolution in parties, a strong leader becomes a necessity for a party for practical purposes. He balances conflicting views, interests and factions in the party and thus ensures the survival of the party. Otherwise parties face the danger of falling apart, either due to rampant factionalism or the prospects of not coming to power, because capturing power matters most to the leaders in the party. So for organizational and electoral purposes a strong leader has a utilitarian function. It could also be attributed to the tendency of other party leaders not to object to such an authoritarian leader, so long as the leader attracts the voters required to win elections.

(vi) Dynastic succession

Coupled with leader-centrism, the role of family and family members in building, sustaining and running a party is nearly ubiquitous in India's political parties. What began with the Nehru family in the Congress party has become the rule now. It is now spreading to the district and sub-district levels. The mantle of leadership in most parties is routinely passed on to the son, daughter, brother, widow or some close blood relative of the supreme leader. The heirs to inherit power are often groomed well. If the expected heir apparent exhibits any ambivalence or remains indifferent or unwilling to enter politics, some leaders in the party or the members of the inner circle of the supreme leader beseech, persuade and bring pressure on him or her to assume leadership as early as possible. Even those leaders who split a party or establish a new party because they resent dynastic succession or feel deprived of leading positions in the party, soon take recourse to the same practice when it comes to leadership succession in their own parties. Parties firmly anchored in some kind of ideology or have a strong organization tend to be an exception to this trend.

In the research on parties, leaders of all parties were asked to give their views on family members of the top leaders assuming leadership positions in the party. Most leaders did not find anything objectionable in this. However, they maintained that birth in the political family could not be a disqualification to become a leader.⁸ They felt that such succession is possible only when people accept such a leader from the family of the top leader. So there is nothing undemocratic in the succession of family members to positions of power, since they are accepted and elected by people.

⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, when taunted by some close associates that he was promoting family members to various key posts, said: "What can I do when exceptionally talented people are born in my family?". Amar Chandel, "Netajii Inc: Charge of the family brigade", *The Tribune*, February 15, 2004.

There could be several plausible explanations as to why such a trend has been growing in recent years. Firstly, the party chief, who often happens to be the founder of the party, sees the party, like a parent, as his own child, which he brought into existence into this world and nurtured with care against all the odds. The top leaders see the party and power as property, as the fruit of his or her hard work and want to bequeath it to family members, as the business people and industrialists do in the country. Secondly, politics has become a profitable business, with little investment but big returns. In the initial decades after independence, most politicians did not encourage their children and family members to enter politics as they thought it involved sacrifice and unpaid service. But over time the situation has changed. Parties have become conduits for amassing personal wealth and power. Today we hear rival leaders trading charges about ill-gotten wealth of top political leaders to the tune of hundreds of crores of rupees. So the leaders are vying with each other to usher in their kith and kin into politics, all in the name of family tradition and service to the people. Thirdly, parties are slush with funds which they need to spend in elections to win power. Leaders need some one whom they can trust in managing these funds, and the choice naturally falls on the family members. Fourthly, people too are willing to accept this kind of succession. They seem to place more trust in the tried and tested families rather than those whom they see as upstarts in politics or those who are untested stuff. Lastly, the leaders below the top leader do not mind this if this helps them in winning power or consolidate their position. And they too resort to such succession practices at their respective levels.

IV. Conclusions

Indian electorate presents several paradoxes. Most people want democracy, but also many want a strong leader to govern the country. Political participation has been high but political awareness is low, especially among women and non-literates. Party and candidates are the most important considerations for many while they vote, but almost a majority says that one should vote the way one's caste or community votes. Such is the context in which the political leaders function and build electoral support.

Caste or community of the voter, *on its own*, is not a determining factor in determining the voting behaviour of most of the Indians. Only 10 per cent of the voters said that caste is the most important consideration. But 45 per cent voters felt that one should vote the way the caste or community votes. It shows that people still consider voting on caste lines is important, but the caste identity merges with securing individual benefits through group association. In a situation where parties are identified with specific castes and communities and are dependent on their support for survival, preference for party and candidate could be on the lines of the dominant thinking among the people of a particular caste and community. When people say that they have voted according to their own opinion, or according to the opinion of spouse or family members, their opinion gets shaped by the calculation of personal or family interest and their association with local groups, which are more often than not are based on caste and community lines. So caste/community, party, candidate and group are interlocked to influence the voting behaviour. The relative weight of each of these factors may depend on the context in which elections take place (sympathy factor, functioning of the ruling party, performance of the government or the effectiveness of the top leader, etc), the level at which elections take place, and vary from place to place.

A few more aspects are important in this context. While an overwhelming proportion of people of certain castes and communities vote for certain parties consistently across several elections and form the core support basis, there are significant minorities. Many among other castes are divided among competing parties. It is also not very difficult for

a minority or majority of voters in a caste or community to shift their support from one party to another from one election to the other. Almost one-third of the voters said that they have voted for different parties in the last few elections. We also find that considerable proportion of uncommitted or floating voters. Nearly one-third of voters made up their mind a day or two before the day of the polling or on the day of polling. This opens up all kinds of possibilities of losing or winning an election for a candidate or a party.

Strong and charismatic leaders exercise extensive powers in most parties. The emergence of state level parties as crucial actors in Indian politics has added momentum to this trend. Also, this can be partly attributed to the people's desire to see a strong leader at the helm of the party and governmental affairs. The decision to vote for a party or a candidate may actually a vote for the top leader leading a party in elections. Most people understand democracy as an arrangement in which their basic needs are fulfilled through government programmes and activities. Most people also think that their immediate problems, as well as physiological and security needs as the main problems faced by the country. Admiration for strong leader coupled with the aspiration to fulfill their basic needs through parties and government might have given rise to populist and charismatic leaders who exercise tremendous political power. Socio-economic backwardness and dependency seem to be the breeding grounds of authoritarian tendencies among the leaders. As parties become leader-centred and power becomes personalistic, which is in turn used for self-aggrandizement and accumulation of wealth, dynastic succession has become the rule in most parties. Voters, party activists and party leaders at various levels seem to have no objection to this trend, if not they are welcoming such a succession.

Education, income and modern occupations seem to be the important factors in nurturing political awareness, secular attitudes and favourable dispositions to democracy. As more and more Indians get better education, income and move to modern occupations the weight of caste and community in influencing the voting behaviour might decline, the populist politics might weaken and the authoritarian tendencies among leaders might weaken.