

What do voters want? Better job opportunities tops the list

Healthcare and drinking water too are among the top five issues for Indian voters, reveals ADR's national survey. Defence and terrorism are not priority issues for most

No office in this land is more important than that of being a citizen

— Felix Frankfurter

PRATEEK RAJ / TRILOCHAN SASTRY

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) commissioned one of the world's largest voter surveys of over 2.7 lakh adult Indians in 534 Lok Sabha constituencies during October to December 2018. This is the third round of the ADR survey and its aim is to understand the key issues that Indian voters care about. In this article we review the voter feedback and shed light on the central and surprising insights we learn.

India is the world's largest democracy with exceptional diversity. Yet, despite the size and diversity, it is striking to learn that Indian voters across gender, caste and age prioritise the same set of universal issues that relate to a desire for better employment opportunities, well-being and quality of life.

Beyond these universal issues, we also learn that urban and rural voters have some distinct priorities. While urban voters desire better governance and environment, rural voters prioritise several issues that relate to the agriculture sector.

Universal issues

A desire for better employment opportunities, is the central issue that Indian voters are most concerned about universally, across demographic groups and in almost all States. As many as 47 per cent of all respondents state it as a top five governance priority, and the issue is especially more acute in urban regions, where 52 per cent of all respondents state it as a top priority. The issue of employment opportunity is a top three issue in 26 of the 28 States surveyed.

The second most acute and universal issue for voters is the availability of better hospitals and primary healthcare centres, with 35

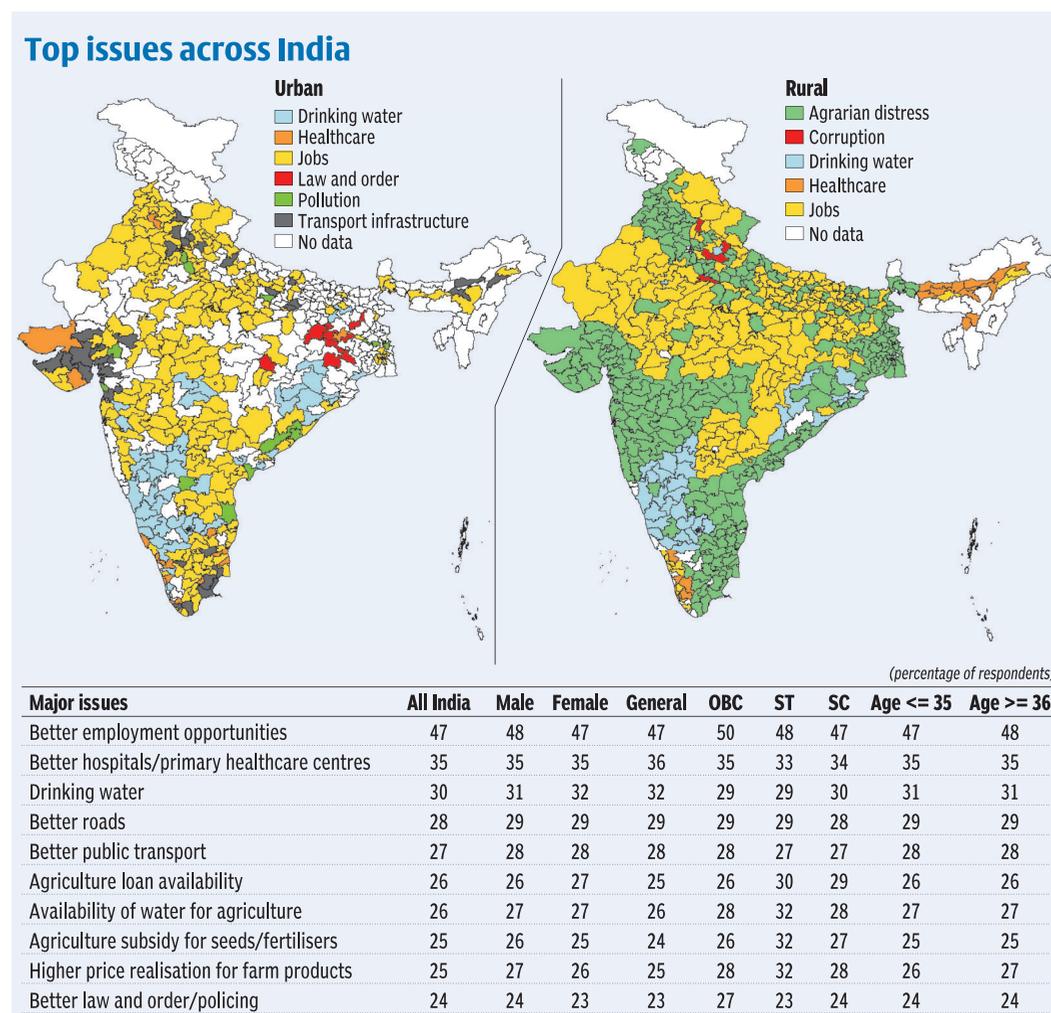
per cent of all respondents (39 per cent in urban areas) listing it as a top five governance priority. In other words, Indian voters are not focussing on the economy alone, and they want better healthcare facilities, and more generally a better quality of life. Healthcare resonates as a top governance issue across all demographic groups, and is a top three issue in 18 of the 28 States surveyed.

The third most important issue that is universally prioritised across all demographic groups (30 per cent of all respondents), and appears as the most important governance issue in the States of Karnataka and Odisha, is the availability of drinking water. The issue of drinking water is followed by a demand for better roads and better public transport (28 per cent and 27 per cent of all respondents state them as top five issues), which too are universally prioritised by voters across all demographic groups.

Drinking water, better roads and public transport are all issues that relate to everyday quality of life of voters, and they are especially acute in urban areas where around 35 per cent of all respondents report them as top five governance priorities. Some other issues of note that voters especially in urban areas prioritise are availability of electricity for domestic use (25 per cent of urban respondents and 20 per cent of all respondents), and school education (20 per cent of urban respondents and 16 per cent of all respondents), both of which also directly relate to the quality of life.

Urban issues

Urban voters prioritise a few issues that are unique to the urban setting, and they relate to a demand for better urban governance and environment. Thirty-seven per cent of urban respondents note traffic congestion as a top five governance issue, and 23 per cent of them say better facilities for cyclists and pedestrians on roads is a top five



issue. These traffic-related issues, coupled with the demand for better roads and public transport, highlight the importance of urban planning and governance in these elections. Such a trend should not come as a surprise, given the rapid pace of urban growth India has seen over the last few decades.

Urban voters are also longing for a better environment. Thirty-four per cent of urban respondents state water and air pollution to be a top five governance issue for them, while noise pollution follows closely at 32 per cent, showcasing the centrality of pollution as an electoral issue at a time when India

has been facing one of the worst instances of urban pollution (currently 22 of the most polluted 30 cities in the world are in India).

Rural issues

Rural voters make the majority of the Indian population, and their specific issues rank among the top governance issues of India. Rural voters, like their urban counterparts, have some distinct priorities and all relate to the economics of agriculture. Forty-one per cent of all rural respondents say availability of water for agriculture is a top five governance issue for them, and 37 per cent say availability of

electricity for agriculture is a top five issue.

Thirty-nine per cent say agricultural loan availability is a top issue for them, and the same fraction of rural respondents report subsidies for seeds/fertiliser to be a top issue. These responses highlight that availability of and funding for inputs of agriculture (water, electricity, seed, fertilisers, loan/subsidy) remains a major concern for rural voters. Additionally, 39 per cent of rural respondents say higher price realisation for farm products is a top five issue, highlighting that rural voters are not satisfied with the current mechanisms of price real-

isation. More broadly, these responses suggest that rural voters are demanding more focussed policies that look at the economics of agriculture as a whole (funding, inputs, pricing) and can improve the fortunes of the slow growing agriculture sector in an otherwise fast-growing Indian economy.

Another primary sector — sand and stone quarrying/mining — was also a salient concern for rural voters with 21 per cent of rural respondents mentioning it as a top five governance issue.

The non-issues

The most important governance priorities for Indian voters relate to the economy, individual well-being and the environment. With this insight, we also learn that “hot button” issues such as eradication of corruption, reservation for jobs and education, lower food prices for consumers, strong defence/military and terrorism are a top five issue for a much smaller fraction of respondents.

While eradication of corruption and reservation of jobs and education are still top five governance issue for 11 per cent and 10 per cent of the respondents respectively (slightly higher in urban areas at 14 per cent and 12 per cent), issues such as lower food prices for customers (7 per cent), strong defence/military (4 per cent) and terrorism (4 per cent) do not emerge as important issues that voters regard as top five priorities for them.

More than strong defence or terrorism, it is better law and order/policing that is a major and universal issue for voters. While 24 per cent of all respondents state policing as a top-five issue, in Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh it emerges as a top three issue.

The issue of law and order is more acute in urban areas where 29 per cent of all urban respondents state it as a top five priority. Similarly, 15 per cent of all respondents mention empowerment of women and security as a top-five, with

men and women giving similar priority to the issue. Once again, we find that voters prioritise security issues like policing and security of women that are of immediate and everyday relevance to them.

United in preferences

While voters state their preferences in surveys, it does not imply that they vote strictly on the basis of these stated preferences. For example, an overwhelming majority of respondents (98 per cent) say that candidates with criminal background should not be in Parliament or State Assembly, but as many as 36 per cent of respondents say they are willing to vote for a candidate with a criminal record if they have done good work in the past.

In an election as large and diverse as India's, it is easy for politicians to attempt to exploit voter differences. Yet, an overwhelming narrative that emerges from the ADR survey is that Indian voters, despite their geographic and demographic diversity, are united in their preferences.

So what does the survey tell us about what India wants? India wants better economic opportunities (employment), well-being (healthcare), quality of life (drinking water, road, and public transport) and security (police and women empowerment).

Urban India also desires a better city life with environmentally conscious urban governance (less traffic and pollution) and rural India is looking for solutions that will fix the slump of growth that the agriculture sector in India faces today (access to water and electricity, availability of loan and subsidies, higher price realisation).

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