

# Predicament of Indian voters

By Kuldip Nayar

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THE ordinary Indian voter is hailed as the *aam aadmi* (common man) by some political parties in India. This is the 15th Lok Sabha which 700 million voters will elect.

Yet, he feels helpless because the elected do not attend to his problems — development and progress. He wants to be heard in the medley of songs, slogans and shouting that make every poll campaign noisier and costlier than before. But the campaign does not discuss what ails him.

The voter himself is confused because he finds leaders shrinking in stature, parties lessening in space and people losing the idea of India. There are more hate speeches than ever before. And no party has any compunction in giving tickets to criminals and the corrupt.

The election to the Lok Sabha is one, but in fact there are going to elections in each state. Everywhere there is a different agenda, a different leadership and a different caste combination to attract voters. Congress, which has led the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), has lost in strength substantially.

Stalwarts like Sharad Pawar, Lalu Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan have joined hands among themselves, with their own regional parties which articulate local problems. The UPA has stayed a shell, leaving top Congress leader Pranab Mukherjee to explain that they have left the Congress alliance, not the overall UPA which rules the country.

Another all-India outfit, the BJP, has suffered the same fate and has lost its allies. Its combination, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), is weaker after the exit of the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh and the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa.

The voter is used to either the Congress or BJP forming the government. A third combination has ruled in the past, but did not last long. He would like to try a non-BJP and a non-Congress government. But he is not sure whether it can mus-

date them. In the midst of a global meltdown, certain steps need to be taken to direct the economy in a particular direction. They may be unpopular but are necessary. On the other hand, the lower half wants such people at the helm who, instead of giving them dole in the name of guaranteed rural employment, can provide a better standard of living.

The polity is so fractured that nobody knows who will be the next prime minister. Top industrialists would like to see Manmohan Singh in the *gaddi* once again.

Even otherwise he may get the consensus because leaders like Lalu and Paswan, who have joined hands with Mulayam Singh of Samajwadi Party, have announced that after "winning at the polls" they will support Manmohan Singh. Still this does not ensure his return. The Congress may itself drop him at the eleventh hour for Rahul Gandhi.

Apart from Manmohan Singh, L.K. Advani, Sharad Pawar, Mulayam Singh, Mayawati, Jayalalithaa and Naidu are candidates for prime minister. The success of every aspirant depends on which party wins the most seats and who from among them can muster a majority in the Lok Sabha. At the moment, any guess is good enough.

Those who are spending tens of millions — the average is Rs50m a seat — and using criminals in their constituency to increase strength are not going to be content with glib talk or empty promises.

They would demand a price: a seat in the cabinet or some contract which may help them 'make up what they have spent'. The government coming through such a process may be anything but decisive. After all, the Singh government knows how it managed to survive the vote of confidence a few months ago.

The Muslim electorate, roughly 12 to 15 per cent, is still undecided. Although some Muslim parties have mushroomed, the community looks like it will vote for non-BJP parties, selecting

ter a majority in the Lok Sabha, 272 out of the 545-member house.

As of today, it leads the other two. But if the past is any guide, the third front has depended on the support of the Congress or BJP. Both have pulled the rug from beneath the front's feet for the sake of political convenience. A mid-term poll has followed.

But this holds good even if the Congress or BJP forms the government. The two may not reach even the present strength — the Congress having 153 seats and the BJP 130. Both are hoping to get back members of their old alliances.

Yet it depends on how strong Mayawati will emerge in UP, Jayalalithaa in Tamil Nadu, Chandrababu Naidu and Biju Patnaik in Orissa. They have not joined any pre-poll formation.

The communists, who are unlikely to retain their old number of 62, have declared that they will not support the Congress even after elections. This only lessens the latter's chance of mustering a majority. But the Congress has no doubt that the communists would be forced to support it and make other allies do so to stop the BJP from coming to power.

The predicament is that in the face of political uncertainty no clear-cut decision may be possible. Any prime minister wanting to keep allies in tow may have to make compromises to accommo-

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the one which can win in a particular state. It has been seen in past elections that Muslims choose a winnable candidate and then vote for him en bloc. The party tag is not important, his secular credentials are. The Congress is hoping to win back the community, once a part of its vote bank.

This expectation is the main reason why the party is going it alone in Bihar where it broke an alliance with Lalu Prasad and in UP with Mulayam Singh who was going out of the way to adjust the party's exaggerated claims.

Whether jettisoning allies before elections for broadening its space will work in favour of the Congress is yet to be seen. Even if it does, the party will have to get substantial outside support to form the government. In the face of these uncertainties, the voter's real problems have been pushed to the background. His pain is writ large on his face. He is nameless, but his affliction has a name: poverty. ■

*The writer is a leading journalist based in Delhi.*