

MP's Sound Of Silence

BJP hopes this shows voters' faith in the party, Congress sees flickers of revival. It's difficult to tell either way. But electors going quiet can be troubling for democracy

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Around 8% fewer voters went to the booths on April 19, the first day of Lok Sabha polling in Madhya Pradesh, than in 2019.

This is twice the national average 4% drop in voter turnouts in the election's first phase.

Tough fight | Publicly, neither party has shown unease with the participation plunge, each blaming the other's lethargic voters. In private, however, BJP cadres we spoke to in eastern MP are anxious. They know that even though BJP took the state assembly with no trouble last year, this year for them will not be a walk in the park. The anti-incumbency feeling is palpable across the state, and the six constituencies in Vindhya and Bundelkhand regions that went to polls on April 26 saw fierce battles.

Difficult to read | What makes BJP workers even more nervous than falling turnouts is how closely the voters are now holding the cards to their chests. The campaign took its usual course. A vast army of party workers, bigger than ever, filled the state with thousands of posters and flags. They have marched up and down the streets of towns

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and villages, organised a record number of processions and rallies, gone door-to-door round the clock. Crores of flowers have been strung into lakhs of garlands to adorn dozens of candidates' necks.

But one crucial electoral ritual has not gone to plan. In the run-up to the elections, the party conducted, as usual, a fine-grained pre-electoral survey. Ordinarily, by the time voters head for the booths, party workers know with great precision – caste by caste, street by street, house by house – who will vote for whom. Since the people conducting these surveys are typically local workers who know their villages and neighbourhoods inside out, they can normally go even further than this, distinguishing voters' honest answers from strategic bluffs.

Chup-chap voters | This is not so this time around. Despite their best efforts, party workers are failing to get voters to reveal their choice. "No one says anything about whom they will vote for!" lamented a BJP worker in the district of Dewas. Public spaces, having

been saturated with signage and rhetoric during campaigning, now ooze an eerie psephological silence. There is no way to judge how well a politician performed or how effective a party's campaign has been.

Beyond the nerve-wracking suspense into which the tight-lipped electors have plunged politicians, this new



silence is giving this round of elections a general aura of distrust, suspicion and moral disquiet. The ballot itself is of course cast in secret, but normally people are publicly outspoken about their choice. In politics, much as in life otherwise, doing things *chup se* or *chupke se*, in

silence and secrecy, morally discredits people, making them suspect of being a dishonest partner or an untrustworthy ally. So people tend to support politicians openly, attend open feasts, display party paraphernalia on the fronts of their homes and even swear political allegiances in theatrical public rituals.

Any politically active person in a village or a town neighbourhood shifting to a new party would put this on public display, lest they acquire a reputation of someone who is undependable and underhanded. At least in village and provincial MP, if the ballot is secret de jure, it is public de facto.

Minority play | Or so has been the case until now. A near-perfect two-party state, MP has been a reliable stronghold for BJP, which has ruled it with almost no interruptions (apart for a two-year period when Congress won with the support of other parties and independent MLAs) for two decades. Over the past 10 years, even the state's small Muslim minority (under 7%) joined the party ranks. Most of them have not been seduced by BJP's ideology or political agenda, but have voted pragmatically since 2014 to secure basic services, whether water or electricity or any number of licences that every Indian citizen needs at some point in life.

In rural Dewas, many Muslims publicly declared their political turn in small groups that would gather in shops or on village *chabutaras*, using standard formulae and ritualised oaths.

Something brewing? | This year sees no such performances – and little sense of what revelations the booths will hold. What can this silence mean? While any party at large, as BJP now is, hopes that the silence is of consent, it is also deeply nervous because the sound of silence may just as well indicate brewing trouble. If claims and protests are not heard on the streets, is something brewing behind the scenes *chupke se*? This anxiety deepens as one looks over the border with Rajasthan, where BJP is having all kinds of unforeseen troubles.

Meanwhile, Congress supporters now have slightly raised hopes. Does the *chup-chap* electorate – silent on the streets as much as in booths – bode pleasant surprises or even a miracle toppling of the pre-poll predictions? Whatever the parties may hope for and fear, most disturbing is the possibility that the silence signifies the death of opposition or even protest within civil society may be settling in.

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MP (29 seats) has voted for 13 seats in the first two phases. It goes to polls on May 7 for the third of its four-phase election