Poll symbols: From bananas to bangles, take your pick

Pronoti Datta , TOI Crest 17 October 2009, 12:57pm IST

Decoding the Election Commission's chart of poll symbols is a rather intriguing exercise in semiotics. Some are easy to decipher - like the Congress party's hand. It could be the hand that represents unity, that governs resolutely and so on. Or it could stand for something entirely un-political , as a joke circulated after the last Lok Sabha elections suggests: when more than 50 per cent of the voters were males under the age of 30, it's no wonder that the hand won. However, not all symbols allotted by the Election Commission have so many connotations. Some are just weird. Purses, televisions, violins, walking sticks, tables , coconuts and bananas - they were all there for voters to choose from during the Maharashtra assembly elections on October 13. Now, how can a candidate with a banana for a symbol be expected to generate voter confidence? What ideals could a banana be a metaphor for? Several things come to mind (none of them suitable for a family paper).

All these belong to a set of free symbols released by the Election Commission which allots them to independent candidates and unrecognised parties. But while candidates can choose from objects like pressure cookers and combs, some requests are rejected outright.

When Anand Prakash Sharma, Independent candidate from Karnal in Haryana, asked to be allotted the condom, he was told it couldn't be done. Safe sex is fine, but keep it out of the campaign.

Raja Mirani, MLA candidate from Ghatkopar West, had to choose between a television, a candle and a coconut. He chose the coconut. '' For us Gujaratis, the coconut is auspicious ,'' he said. '' At the start of every new venture, we break a coconut.'' During his rallies, Mirani said, supporters would garland him with wreaths of coconuts. '' Every rally we must have got between 10,000-15 ,000 coconuts,'' he recalled. What did he do with so many? '' They were broken and distributed among beggars,'' he said. '' If we had given them whole coconuts, they would have sold them.''

Cut-outs of mangoes (the PMK symbol) line a street in Tamil Nadu. (Left). A cup and saucer atop a car spread the message of a candidate in Haryana

While the folks of Ghatkopar feasted on coconuts, residents of Bandra East were serenaded by whistles as Lok Satta party candidate Jalinder Adsule campaigned, trailed by a tempo with a fabricated whistle atop it.

The whistle, with its connotations of exposing corrupt practices, is meant to signify '' a party with a new culture and a new political ideology'' , said Adsule, who is Lok Satta's first electoral candidate in Maharashtra.

Ulhasnagar candidate Suresh Gyanchand Jodhani was fortunate enough to get a symbol that matched his profession. A lawyer, Jodhani was allotted a coat. '' People here know me as a lawyer.''

Some candidates were less fortunate and were allotted symbols that held no significance for them. Like Minoo Savakshaw Nalawalla , a 63-year-old freelance writer, who was allotted a table. '' The symbol has no meaning,'' declared Nalawalla, who says he represents the much-ignored Parsi community.

Independents and small parties are usually overshadowed by their more prominent counterparts in terms of visibility. But there have been occasions on which an eccentric symbol has caught a voter's fancy.

In the 2004 assembly elections, writer Havovi Kapadia voted for the Womanist Party of India, largely because it had a feminist agenda and was represented by an arm full of bangles. The party, which she refers to as the Bangle Party of India, was floated by Varsha Kale, head of the Bar Girls Association. '' I didn't think any of the candidates had done anything in my area, so I wanted to split their votes. The symbol caught my eye.''

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