

Sharma, Sudhindra and Pawan Kumar Sen. 2008. *Nepal Contemporary Political Situation – V: Opinion Poll Report*. Kathmandu: Interdisciplinary Analysts and Asia Foundation.

Over the past few years surveys and opinion polls have made inroads into the Nepali academia, the media, the gossip circle, and even the minds of the royalties. Under review here is an opinion poll report titled *Nepal Contemporary Political Situation-V: Opinion Poll Report*. The report was brought out by the Interdisciplinary Analysts (IDA) in March 2008. According to the report, two international non-governmental organizations, the Asia Foundation and the Enabling State Program offered financial assistance to the IDA to carry out the polls. The survey team was led by sociologist Sudhindra Sharma and statistician Pawan Kumar Sen. According to the report, the IDA carried out its fieldwork between 23 December 2007 and 12 January 2008. In this review, I focus on survey instruments, a few methodological issues, broad contours of survey findings, especially the inability of the opinion poll to predict

Constituent Assembly (CA) election results, and general assumptions that inform the survey engineering process.

The survey employs a pre-coded closed-questionnaire administered among randomly sampled 3,010 Nepali adults (18 years and above). It employs a multi-stage probability sampling strategy. The sampling procedure includes randomly selected 30 districts from 5 development and 3 geographic regions. It then goes down through a random selection procedure to Village Development Committees (VDCs) and/or municipalities, the wards, and finally to the households. It identifies respondents through the Kish-grid method.<sup>1</sup> The poll report claims that its field staff carried out “in-depth” interviews to add qualitative information to the quantitative data generated through the structured questionnaires. In addition, one hundred and twenty respondents from marginal groups were deliberately added to ensure that they were adequately represented in the final sample. The caste and ethnic composition of the sample generally reflect the characteristics of the national population.<sup>2</sup> Given the difficulty of creating alternative sampling frames, Sharma and Sen do their best in selecting a nationally representative probability sample.

My quibbles with the report, in addition to a few methodological issues, are on two major areas – framing of the questions and often unstated premises of analysis that perhaps partially derive from uncritical faith in survey research and the role of the researcher in designing and developing survey instruments. To begin with, several questions in the questionnaire are simply too vague. Consider this question: “Generally speaking do you think the country is moving in the right direction, or do you think it is moving in the wrong direction?” Although follow-up questions are put to the respondents presumably to clarify the issue, it is still possible that respondents would be confused. In fact, it is not very easy even for trained eyes to imagine the whole country *moving* in one or the other direction. Perhaps, the assumption in putting vague questions in the questionnaire is that people hold coherent worldviews toward events and objects in the world. Even if we discount the fluid and incredibly

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1 The Kish-grid method is used in survey to avoid bias that some respondents e.g. men would be easier to contact than say women. In this poll, one individual was randomly selected from the list of all household members aged 18 and above.

2 In fact, several caste and ethnic groups in the sample deviate from the population mean (the stated margin of error,  $\pm 1.8\%$ ). This, however, should not be a big problem as the sample size is relatively large. The sample actually is weighted to make it “consistent” with the population.

complex political situation in Nepal in early 2008, this goes against the widely agreed view in cognitive psychology that people generally do not hold coherent and consistent worldviews and that it is possible—in fact “normal”—to hold contradictory worldviews. This is as true about social scientists as the illiterate masses. It is plausible then that people take certain aspects of the political developments in the country as “positive” and others as “negative.” One might wonder if such big and broadly generalizing questions produce reliable and valid responses.

Similarly, vague response categories are there to rob respondents and perhaps readers of the report of their tranquility. One of the response categories to the question of women’s problems, for example, includes lack of “freedom.” Had the authors clarified such terms through their “in-depth” interviews, readers could have better grasped what people meant when they claimed such lofty ideals as (lack of) freedom as one of the women’s “biggest” problems. Finally, in several places, response categories are not simply inclusive. This does not just violate the statistical principle of “independence” and “inclusiveness,” but potentially confuses the readers. Consider again this question in the questionnaire: “why do you think people express their political views without feeling intimidated” (p. 24)? The response categories include “the conflict has declined” and the “Maoists have entered into open politics.” Respondents as well as readers of the report are likely to be confused distinguishing the meaning of these two response categories. Finally, while it is not clear if the order of questions and response categories in the questionnaire were presented exactly as reported in the annexes of the report, long lists of response categories are likely to create confusion in the minds of the respondents and the field interviewers might have had hard times explaining the meaning of the response categories.

A careful look at the report suggests that there is room to suspect that the overall framing of questions may not do justice to political actors with varying ideological positions and interests. The framing of questions (and perhaps the order of the response categories), for example, is more likely to elicit favorable or unfavorable responses to one or the other party. The Maoists are the case in point. Over all, it appears that negative attributes to the Maoists (and response categories that are likely to put the Maoists in a negative light) outnumber positive ones. One wonders, for example, why the often romanticized stories about the Maoists such as the quick dispensation of justice, movements against gambling and alcoholism, inclusiveness, and women’s “empowerment” fail to appear in the questionnaire. Similarly, hot issues such as the integration of the “two

armies” are conveniently forgotten. Had the researchers taken notice of all this, it would have been easier for readers and analysts to gauge the national political mood in early 2008.

The issue is not just about the Maoists. The questionnaire has presented other questions in a similar vein. For example, protests are largely presented in the questionnaire as “negative events.” But the fact is that protests are not just nuisances; they are lively forms of political communication especially if we take into account the fact that alternative forms of political communication in Nepal hardly favor those at the bottom of the societal hierarchy. A cursory look at the protest events in contemporary Nepal would confirm that protests do produce “results.” In addition, protests have been carried out by powerful interest groups such as transportation syndicates and petroleum dealers as well as powerfully organized professional groups such as the medical establishment. Lumping every protest event as a nuisance in some artificially imposed categories may deflect our attention from a deficient state to the “ignorant masses” and the unruly crowd. It potentially might give a distorted picture of the nature of the state, society, and polity in contemporary Nepal.

The ignorant masses theory is furthered, perhaps unwittingly, in numerous ways. In an interesting twist, the authors of the report juxtapose expert knowledge on the Constituent Assembly (CA) with the people’s responses. The “rationale” of the poll then is not just to find out the distribution of political attitudes among different sections of the population but also to verify people’s “correct” knowledge on the CA. If vague questions appear everywhere, then questions with finer and exact details make equally elegant presence. This is how the survey purports to test the people’s knowledge on the meaning and procedure of the CA elections. In fact, one can conclude from the report that just over five percent of the respondents “knew very well” i.e. *accurately* what a constituent assembly *really* is and *how* it will likely be held. We know now that over 60 percent of the total populace voted in the CA elections. One then wonders under what conditions the *ignorant masses* took part in the CA elections.

The ignorant masses theory appears in the questionnaire in other ways too. Questions such as “Have you ever heard about the CA elections?” and “Have you heard about federalism?” may *not* be inherently informative. These questions might have made sensational media stories and the people at certain quarters with certain political persuasions might have basked in the reported ignorance of the masses, but their substantive contributions are doubtful. In fact, these are the types of questions the

media really loves. A cursory look at media reports at the time of the release of the report shows that the poll report succeeded in doing just that. It is hard to believe though that people *did not know* what the CA *really meant*. Consider this very likely scenario: a respondent says that the CA election is just like any other election and that the CA will help her improve her living standard. The experts are sure to give her an “F” grade because she did not know the “correct” procedure and the *real* purpose of the CA. But is there any “objective” ground to reject this answer as “incorrect?” I suspect that the large number of “ignorant” masses reported in the poll report is just an artifice of the experts’ insistence on the “correct” procedure and knowledge. To put the issue in a different way, the whole report gives readers a feeling of uneasiness about its usefulness. This is especially so if we readily believe that just over 5 percent of the total population (in early 2008) understood as important a political issue as the Constituent Assembly.

All this then leads to the problem of “interpretation.” While the presentation of descriptive statistics in survey and opinion polls reports is a common practice, readers reasonably can expect more from the report authored by the country’s experienced and well-known social scientists. Even if cross-tabulations of “variables” appear in the digital appendix of the report, what is basically presented in the report are plain descriptions of frequency tables and charts. If the authors had eschewed from making any interpretation altogether, it would have been a different story though. Often “interpretations” are smuggled into the report through the backdoor. The report, for example, mentions in the very beginning that a few political events during the survey period “could only have created favorable impression in the minds of the public and affected their response” (p. 3). Political and other events do affect public opinion. But the problem is complex. Apparently, the authors are amazed at the frequency of the “positive” responses the respondents gave to the field interviewers. The argument that “events” cause political attitudes to sway in a particular direction can not be taken for granted. One can easily argue that political events spawn contentious meanings fraught with uncertainty and multiple interpretations. On top of this, political events are but only a few of the factors that affect public opinion. Readers encounter similar types of “interpretations” throughout the report.

The perpetuation of the ignorant masses theory together with the reliance on an event theory of interpretation had its toll on analysts and interpreters of the survey findings when it came to predicting CA election results. Prediction of election results actually is one of the areas that

makes survey and opinion polls an exciting enterprise in the first place. As we know now, the survey miserably failed to predict CA election results. The poll (in early 2008) predicted that 13 percent would vote for the Nepal Communist Party-UML, 11 percent for the Nepali Congress, and 8 percent for the Maoists. Of course, readers are told that “events” and a few other factors might affect election results (the report is dated March 2008, but was published after the CA elections). The report goes as far as suggesting that people might vote based on “group decisions.” This indeed is a sober argument. But if this is the case, the very foundation and usefulness of survey research (note the statistical principle of independence and randomness) which is based on individual preferences are shattered to the core.

Interestingly, the report presents the “undecided voters” as one of the major causes of the unpredictability of the CA results. When a survey results in an extraordinarily large number of respondents as “undecided,” the failure of prediction should not be glossed over as “caused” by undecided voters or other factors. Rather undecided voters themselves require interpretation. Actually numbers of undecided voters appear to be significant not just in the sensitive case of political party preference, but also in several other areas. It is also sensible to do methodological soul-searching at this point. It could be that field interviewers [presumably urban young men and women] somehow failed to win the trust of the respondents. One can conveniently argue that it was not just that the people chose to remain silent or feign ignorance; but they might have told the interviewers what the respondents believed the interviewers had *actually* wanted to hear.

Another reason could be the issue of privacy. The survey draft report circulated in the Internet early this year shows several photographs in which field researchers are seen talking to the respondents in group and family settings. This might have created situations in which people could not express their political opinions freely. One can then suspect the validity of not only the sensitive information such as voting preferences but also other information presented in the report. Finally, we are not told whether or not any routine statistical test was carried out to figure out “systematic biases” (if any) that resulted in the large number of “non-responses.” In the end, the report is likely to puzzle the readers of the poll report over how the Maoists got their share of votes (about 30 percent in the proportion representation count) as we know now from the Election Commission and where the “monarchists” and “Hindus” presented in the report vanished. This is even more confusing if we take into account the

poll finding that big issues such as state restructuring and the Constituent Assembly which the Maoists championed religiously and more forcefully than other major parties in the fray were *not* high in the ordinary citizens' agendas.

Finally, readers are likely to find two short essays presented in the forms of forward and preface in the beginning of the report more interesting than the poll data themselves. It appears that we are finally very much into our own Age of Enlightenment. Here we can read not only the poetic descriptions of the *science* of survey research and the power of numbers and quantification to represent the social reality but also romantic optimism about the salubrious effect of the "science" on democracy and (lack of) *scientific culture* in general. Deepak Gyawali responding to the critics of the draft survey report early this year writes almost poetically: "...why a section of Nepali intelligentsia believes fervently that what writers imagine sitting in a closed room reflects social reality more accurately than what dozens of surveyors fanning across the country measure. Is it just due to lack of scientific culture?" Earlier in the report, political sociologist Anup Pahari writes in his forward that "systematic opinion polling and democracy have evolved jointly after the 1940s to the point where today democratic leadership is unthinkable in the absence of access to regular and reliable public opinion snapshots." If Mr. Pahari is in fact alluding to opinion polls by what he terms "public opinion snapshots," his statement is grossly exaggerated. Both historical and current practices indicate that the said connection between democracy (and perhaps public policy) and opinion polls are tenuous if not non-existent. If opinion polls were that efficacious, U.S. President George Bush would resign at least five times a day especially during his second presidency. And the U.S. House of Representatives which at times was rated even worse than President Bush in opinion polls would be disbanded more than a dozen times a month! But this did not happen. What can opinion polls and social surveys do then?

Even well-known survey and statistical method experts these days would not make scientific hubris when it comes to survey methodology and interpretation in social sciences. In fact, one encounters as many defensive publications on survey methodology these days as aggressively and poetically described "science of survey research." One can easily surmise that post-modernist assault on the certainty of the social sciences, sea-change in the philosophy of science after the ground-breaking work of Thomas Kuhn in the 1970s, development of sophisticated qualitative

research tools, and the “agency turn” in social sciences have put the traditional “science of survey” research on the defensive.

Indeed, social survey is a useful tool. Carefully crafted surveys save time and resources. It is especially useful if we are to elicit socio-economic and demographic characteristics of a population.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it will not be an exaggeration to say that political opinion polls are part of media and academic cultures rather than “political culture.”<sup>4</sup> Often journalists make sensational reports selectively out of these reports. Consider how the survey report spawned “ignorant masses” and “vanishing Maoists” theories in the local media which ultimately put media analysts and survey interpreters in Nepal at shame in the aftermath of CA elections. Now consider this. At a time when the whole country is engulfed in the debate on the integration of the “two armies,” nobody seems to be interested in a survey report that mentions that Nepalis (74.4 percent) seem to be on board with the idea that the Maoist warriors and the Nepal Army should be integrated (Hachhethu 2008:122).

At times politicians do guard survey and opinion polls results jealously. Even former King Gyanendra advanced the logic of the “institution of the monarchy” in one of his interviews to international journalists. The same was the case with one of the powerful factions within the Nepali Congress party. While it is not clear whether survey experts influenced the views of these political actors, there is reason to believe that surveys and opinion polls have not yet become a firm part of democratic political culture even in “advanced” democracies. We have already discussed part of the reason for all this previously: political opinions at best are very rough indicators and are extremely sensitive to the way questions are phrased. Moreover, poll findings are not stable over time and are vulnerable to “public issue attention cycles.” In fact, opinion polls are notorious for producing more heat than light.

Along with the media, academicians are other likely candidates who would be guarding social survey and opinion poll data jealously. To the

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3 Here too, the difficulty of eliciting “factual” information (e.g., income) does not vanish altogether. In addition, politics of expert-imposed categories and the potential distortion of information through seemingly innocuous fieldwork add further complexity.

4 The very usefulness of the concept of “political culture” (defined as the aggregate of the distribution of political attitudes elicited through survey technologies) in society has been questioned rigorously in the 1970s and 1980s. When the concept of political culture regained currency beginning from the early 1990s, it came in a very different form.

extent that responses are “true” reflections of the inner states of the respondents, academicians can avail of these reports as grist for their academic mills. To cite a few obvious examples from the report, one can ask: Why are there variations in responses across different socio-economic and demographic groups and ecological belts? How have people’s perceptions changed over time? Why is it that “religious” organizations, ethnic organizations and “civil society” appear as most trusted institutions in the country? But this is a very different issue, far from what the poll report claims about survey and opinion poll’s efficacy on democracy, political culture, and scientific culture. To insist that opinion polls contribute to these areas does not appear to be one of the very promising ways of marketing survey and opinion poll research in Nepal.

### **Reference**

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