

Health as an Agenda in Indian Politics: A Study of Election Manifestos in 16th General Elections

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Abstract : Health, education and employment opportunities available for a common citizen reflect the development status of a country. Health of an individual affects the growth of a country in every aspect. According to a study by WHO, India is estimated to lose more than \$237 billion of its GDP over the period 2006-15 on account of premature death and morbidity from Non-communicable diseases alone. Each year 37 million people fall below poverty line due to high expenditure on health services they have to incur. Falling sick puts a double burden on them in terms of loss of income and expenditure on health care which pushes them further into debt and poverty. Adding to the gravity of situation, public spending on health in India has itself declined after liberalization from 1.3% of GDP in 1990 to 0.9% in 1999. The Approach Paper of the Government of India to the Twelfth Five Year Plan indicated that health expenditure alone as a per cent of GDP was about 1.4 per cent (B.E.) in 2011-12. It also mentioned that if one included expenditure on rural water supply and sanitation, the figure would be about 1.8 per cent. Given the abysmally low level of priority accorded to health in Indian economic policy, it becomes rather important to study the representation of health in the Indian public sphere. To this end, this study examines the prioritization of health in the public policy agenda of the national/regional political parties as evidenced in their election manifestos at a time when the nation is poised to go for the General Elections. The paper also focuses attention on the prioritization of health in the public perception as evidenced in their reasons for their preferences for a particular party or individual contestant. To arrive at the reasons for the priority level accorded by the political actors and the citizens, the study uses Focus groups of health policy makers, media persons, medical practitioners and voters. Collected data will be analysed in the theoretical framework of spiral of silence and agenda setting theory.

Keywords : health, election manifestos, public perception, policies

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