ELECTION SYMBOL EQUITY: POINTS TO PONDER

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A brand is a distinguished name and / or symbol (such as logo, trademark or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either a seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors. That is the classical definitions of a brand. Similarly an election symbol is a distinguished logo or design allotted by the Election Commission which is intended to identify a political party, and to differentiate from those of other parties. The initial efforts of the party are focused towards symbol introduction in the constituencies. In addition, gradually, as it gets familiar and receptive among masses the stage of building the symbol comes in. And that is where symbol decisions have to be taken. Developing an election symbol requires a great deal of long term investment, especially in promotions.
As per the Election Commission of India, a political party shall be treated as a recognised National party, if, and only if, - either (A) (i) the candidates set up by it, in any four or more States, at the last general election to the House of the People, or to the Legislative Assembly of the State concerned, have secured not less than six percent of the total valid votes polled in their respective States at that general election; and (ii) in addition, it has returned at least four members to the House of the People at the aforesaid last general election from any State or States; or (B) (i) its candidates have been elected to the House of the People, at the last general election to that House, from at least two percent of the total number of parliamentary constituencies in India, any fraction exceeding one-half being counted as one; and (ii) the said candidates have been elected to that House from not less than three States. A political party, other than a National party, shall be treated as a recognised State party in a State or States, if, and only if, - either (A) (i) the candidates set up by it, at the last general election to the House of the People, or to the Legislative Assembly of the State concerned, have secured not less than six percent of the total valid votes polled in that State at that general election; and (ii) in addition, it has returned at least two members to the Legislative Assembly of the State at the last general election to that Assembly; or (B) it wins at least three percent of the total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of the State, (any fraction exceeding one-half being counted as one), or at least three seats in the Assembly, whichever is more, at the aforesaid general election. Hence when a national party chooses a symbol say CPI (M), it will hold on to the hammer and a sickle, intersecting each other in a red coloured flag. Hence it will not be allotted to any other party-say national or state anywhere in India. However, those recognized as a state party, the free symbols available other than the national parties can be chosen. That is why the cycle symbol allotted to Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh is the same for Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh.

Any new symbol needs to be diffused to the people at large. If we see the symbol of Congress over the years, initially it had the cow and calf after a split in the party led to two factions claiming the image. This made the election commission to offer hand, frock, elephant, cake and nail clippers. Mrs. Indira Gandhi of the Congress (I) understanding that hand can be easily promoted and can have a better imagery, decided to choose the same. In 1984 when Bahujan Samaj Party was formed in Uttar Pradesh, they wanted a symbol which is well understood by the Dalits and others. Elephant was strongly linked to Buddhism and that has connections to the Dalits. This led to the party choosing Elephant as its symbol. During 2007, when BSP was wooing the upper caste Brahmins, the symbol which has close links with Lord Ganesha came in handy. It can be well seen that by getting a symbol which can be promoted easily, the parties get an upstart in the elections unlike those who are waiting to be given a symbol. In any population as per Chris Rogers theory of diffusion of innovation, there are 2.5% innovators, 13.5% early adopters, 34% early majority, 34% late majority and the rest laggards. The innovators are those who are party functionaries, who quickly understands the symbol and start working on the same. In any elections, the early majority and the late majority swing the votes for a party. Hence if the symbol is there in advance, it becomes easy for a party to promote. When a government is formed, this symbol becomes an important ingredient during the period and creates awareness among the electorates. In all the public functions of the party in power, this symbol gets reflected. If one looks at the Samathi sthal of MG Ramachandran, the former CM of Tamilnadu, the entrance gate is having two leaves (party symbol) which is kept upside down and is allowed by the Election commission. Ms. Mayawati during her tenure as the CM of Uttar Pradesh created Dalit Prerana Sthal at Noida which had elephants in the walls aplenty. During elections, it became difficult for Election commission to cover and the expenses were heavy. This symbol becomes important in our country since the literacy levels are low. In the states of BIMARU (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh – add Jharkhand and Chattisgarh), literacy levels are very low and these symbols come in handy. In a state
like Kerala, during 1996, 1998 and 1999, V M Sudheeran was a winner from Congress (I). However during the 2004 elections, V M Sudheeran lost the elections to KS Manoj of CPI (M) by a narrow margin of 1009 votes. In fact there was another V M Sudheeran who stood in the election as an independent and got 8000 votes. His failure in 2004 election fortified the need of a practical strategy to stop the contesting of fake candidates in elections to mislead the voters. With his failure in 2004, the fake candidature became a controversial issue in every constituency. The clamour to stop 'Fake Candidature' is increasing day by day, but the same was not tackled properly even in the 2009 poll. This can be a pointer in the elections fought in the highly literate state where every person can decipher the words and may not look for symbols is a special case. A permanent symbol can be a differentiating factor in many elections. The BJP’s prime ministerial candidate, Shri Narendra Modi is wearing the symbol - *Lotus* in his coat. As he is projected more by the television channels across the country, the campaign managers of Modi have clearly taken the advantage during this 2014 elections. Whenever his image is beamed across, the symbol goes along capturing billion eyes and it takes the population very easily. AAP chose the *broom* as the symbol signifying that they are here as revolutionaries to clean the mess.

In 1996, GK Moopanar, formed Tamil Manila Congress breaking away from Congress(I) and fought the elections independently. During those elections they were allotted the symbol *cycle* but could not muster a single seat in the elections. They used the symbol effectively by travelling across constituencies and also using Rajnikant films to portray their symbol effectively which helped them to obtain majority. However when Shri P Chidambaram broke away from the party and formed, Congress Janaanayaka Peravai, he used DMK’s symbol of *rising sun* fearing any other symbol could be troublesome for him. The classic case of symbol equity could be seen when Dr MGR died and AIADMK split into two factions in 1987. The Election commission did not give the two parties the symbol and pride of the party - *two leaves*. They had to pick two different symbols which posed a problem and the DMK with its established symbol- *rising sun* won hands down. The 2014 elections in Kerala is a similar issue with the *two leaves* being the symbol of state party- Kerala Congress (M). They attract the Tamil minority in the Kottayam constituency from where the party is contesting using the symbol *two leaves* which is very close to their heart as it is the symbol of MGR. The electorate of about 1.2 lakhs could be decisive in the ensuing election and they have put up hoardings in Tamil in their settlements in Kottayam constituency. The Thrinamul Congress in West Bengal had to propropate their symbol *Jora ghas phul* vehemently as it had to be reached to the masses. BJP in most of the constituencies where lotus was available aplenty handed over to their electorate the party symbol. In Kerala, the *ladder* symbol is synonymous with the Muslim League and among those voters who are primarily muslims where the literacy levels are lower than that of Christians and Hindus, this symbol becomes an important one for elections. The Shirmani Akali Dal has a strong presence in Punjab and have one MLA in Haryana. Their symbol is the Scale. Their candidates used to fight on BJP symbol in Delhi. With the sizeable Sikh population, if they get their candidate win in Delhi assembly elections on the party symbol, it will be helpful for the party to get status of national party from election commission. The symbol once is created and nurtured can be taken to the national scenario and can even create problems for the state party if they had the symbol. The national party status will ensure that the state party will have to look for new symbol. Incase if AIADMK is able to garner the status of the national party, then Kerala Congress (M) will have to look for other symbols which will create more problems. It is hence advised to find a symbol given by the election commission which will not clash with that of the national parties. The seven C’s of creating a symbol can be summarized as follows:

1. To create *clarity* among the voters once a stable symbol is given.
2. To effectively communicate to the voters and reach those illiterate especially.
3. To be consistent in the continuing campaigns to educate future prospects.
4. To show credibility to the voters and their relationship with the symbol.
5. It is a challenge to present the party in innovative ways that will continue to attract more potential voters and be creative.
6. To connect with respect to the symbol in all activities and create connectivity with the electorate and
7. To create competencies using the symbol and nurture the same to avoid more competition.

To conclude, it can be seen that an equity developed by using a symbol can create wonders in the market with more voters inclined to the established symbol and also those who had symbols given long back start to get the first mover advantage. This symbol will create competencies, consistency and credibility which are closed to looking them as ‘brand’. Definetly those brands which are closer to the people will win in the hustings…