

ARE ELECTIONS RITUALS?

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Elections are conducted to determine who should govern and who should not. In that sense, they are political rituals. They are the foundation stone of democracy and express the people's will. In India, we have adopted the indirect or representative system and have elections every five years or less, depending on the stability of the government, to elect our representatives to the state legislatures and the union. Universal adult franchise, periodic elections and independent election machinery are the key features of this ritual. Holding regular elections in a vast country with a huge population is not an easy task, but we have done it for many years. **Yet, many ask whether this ritual is worth it. Do elections change anything for the people or are they mere rituals?** To answer such questions, let us first consider the functions of elections.

The Functions of Elections

Democracy cannot become operative without elections. *Elections enable voters to select their representatives and hold them accountable for their performance.* Accountability can sometimes be undermined, for instance when leaders do not care whether they are re-elected or not, or when one party or coalition is so dominant that the voters have effectively no choice. But the process of regular elections promotes accountability and contributes to the continuation of democracy. Elections also serve as forums for the discussion of public issues and facilitate the expression of public choice. *They thus further the political education of citizens and the responsiveness of democratic governments to the people's will.*

Elections moreover serve to legitimise the policies and actions of those who wield power. They reinforce the stability and legitimacy of the political community and link citizens to each other, thereby confirming the viability of the polity. *As a result, elections generally help to facilitate social and political integration.* Finally, elections

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confirm the worth and dignity of individual citizens as human beings. *Participation is indeed an important social need and citizens feel included as a result of voting.* Voting gives people an opportunity to have their say and participate in governance, increasing their sense of belonging to the state. **For these reasons, the long battle for the right to vote and the demand for equality in electoral participation can be viewed as the manifestation of a profound human craving for participation and contribution to the life of the state.**

Elections have a ritualistic aspect as well. In spite of their limitations, the political campaigns are educative events accompanied by rallies, banners, posters, headlines, and television coverage, all of which call attention to key issues and the need for participation. There are loud pronouncements by every party to transform the country. Candidates, political parties, and interest groups representing diverse objectives raise issues and invoke nationalism or patriotism, reform or revolution, past glory or future promises. They arouse emotions, channel them toward collective symbols, break the monotony of daily life, and focus attention on the common fate of citizens and the country.

Campaigns and door-to-door visits make the voters feel important. Even the poor count during elections. Individuals come to their doorsteps begging for votes. People come to realise the successes and failures of different parties and what they stand for through their manifestos. *Parties are central to elections.* The selection and nomination of candidates, a vital first stage of the electoral process, generally lies in the hands of political parties. The party system can thus be regarded as an extension of the electoral process. All said and done, the electorate may have only a limited power to determine government policies by casting their votes. But they thus confer on a group of politicians the authority to make policies on their behalf.

The Limitations of Elections

There are however several serious complaints about the electoral process. *These often refer to corrupt practices and the use of caste and religion to win elections and in the process divide the country.* Electoral offences are numerous, and the influence of money, muscle power and the misuse of government machinery

create discontent. The media glorify the candidates they support and vilify their opponents in abusive language. There is a lack of civility and increased scandals run in practically all parties. The candidates often have criminal cases against them, and they hardly address political and economic issues.

And this is not all. *The participation remains very defective.* In several states, hardly 60% of the people vote. And good and honest people cannot usually contest elections, for it requires huge finances and influence to obtain tickets from parties. Elections are about acquiring or maintaining power. The winners are generally from the business class, zamindars, traders and merchants. *Once elected, most politicians hardly remember the electorate and look after their own interests more than those of the masses. Their legislations and policies mainly favour the rich and the powerful. And the evils of the system are on the increase.*

Hatred, Discrimination and Violence

Elections often churn out a lot of ugliness and poison India with divisions and hate. Ever since the politics of Ayodhya, our country has witnessed aggressive anti-minority and anti-subaltern campaigns by some parties, creating insecurity and panic among millions of citizens. Our society was undoubtedly divided earlier, but *Ayodhya was a turning-point in the institutional communalisation of the country.* Systematic efforts to garner votes through hate and violence have created havoc in the country. The politics of divisiveness has negatively affected subaltern communities, especially the minorities, SCs/STs and OBCs. The recent bashing of women in a pub in Mangalore and its justification with clear guidelines on how women should behave have highlighted once again the discrimination against women. (Some years ago, sati was even justified as a part of culture!) Women are also still denied their legitimate right for political representation with the delay in passing the bill for 33% reservation in the parliament.

All this goes on despite the several gains the country has made since independence. We have had a Dalit President, Dalit Chief Ministers, minority Presidents and Chief Ministers, a woman President and women in high places in politics along with other elected members. We have laws that condemn descent-based caste discrimination and

affirm the protection of minorities, women and children. And yet the practice of violence against them remains pervasive and deeply rooted. **Politics has not been able to reduce these social evils, though it has increased our social consciousness.**

Lack of a Genuine Economic Agenda

In recent years, political parties in general have hardly put forward a genuine economic agenda for the masses. The fact that over 77% of Indians subsist on less than Rs 20 a day is an indicator that those who govern us are not really interested in people's economic development. Political parties are not concerned about food, clothing, shelter, literacy, employment and other livelihood issues. Instead, they manufacture artificial issues to fool the public. Many social schemes have dried up for want of state funds, and the public distribution system has collapsed. Bread- and butter-related crimes proliferate, and public expressions of disaffection are increasing everywhere with the ongoing recession.

The livelihood problems of the masses, the lack of employment, the agricultural crisis and the farmers' suicides, the external threats and our homegrown communalism have thus become *the breeding ground for recourses to authoritarian/fascist 'alternatives'*, as war and 'nationalism' are recommended to deliver the undeliverable. *The proposed solutions are all aimed at gaining power, and they have no relevance to the lives of the masses.* While the masses ask for bread and butter with employment, they are offered the Indo-US nuclear deal, the promise of constructing the Ram Temple, the war against terrorism and the hope of India's progress in the international community.

The Expectations of Various Social Groups

Do elections solve people's problems or are selfish individuals using them to serve their own interests and those of their kith and kin? **Do elections bring any change in the lives of ordinary citizens?** Is it worth spending huge amounts of the tax-payers' money for them? *Corruption has been a perennial issue in Indian elections.* The corruption carried out by politicians makes people lose hope in the system. In recent years, a system of buying votes has even been put in place in Karnataka and elsewhere. One can say, perhaps cynically, that the electorate often votes for personal benefits

rather than the public good. *Each social group has expectations from elections, but mostly for its own advantages.*

The elite in India dream of a two-party 'de-politicised' system. They would like a system that does not interfere with the economy and promote big business. They expect the political class to be morally upright and authoritarian in style, and to support the globalisation of the economy and the interests of the rich and powerful. They want to overcome 'terrorism' through improved technology and canny management, and if not, through a war to end all wars. **The labouring class** has other aspirations. They would like the state to intervene on their behalf on the issues of labour protection, minimum wages, insurance, hours of work and their right to form unions. **The upwardly mobile classes** desire to come up. As long as they somewhat progress, they support the establishment.

The Left parties want to see the emergence of leaders like Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia and others with a social vision for the country, as neo-liberal market fundamentalism breathes its last. **The progressives** hope that the various sections of the Indian Left will come together to forge an alternative to the two national parties that are declining. **The middle class votes** for tax deductions and infrastructure projects, and **the upper class** for the politicians whom they can influence or buy.

There are others who wish the contrary to happen. **The Indian corporates** desire the rule of Modi, efficient and authoritarian, though communal. They desire a state where labour can be hired and fired, and capital reigns supreme. As birds of the same feather, **the right-wing Hindutva ideologies and the Jihadis** wish for a victory of the BJP. Many Jihadists indeed want the BJP back in power, since such a return might promise a renewed communalisation of the Indian polity, a situation that offers scope for Jihadist intervention. *The states support regional rather than national parties to fulfill their aspirations.* In such a context, one cannot too seriously blame the poor for selling their votes: they indeed believe that this is the only gain they can get from elections, because no party cares about their interests.

What is the Use of Changing Governments?

Elections change governments. Change often means that the incumbent government is thrown out. It also provides the opportunity

to punish the individuals or parties who have taken the voters for granted. *But one should not however expect class interests to give way to mass interests.* Whatever may be the claims of parties, mass interests have never been the main concerns of the ruling regimes in liberal states. In spite of the attractive promises of various manifestos, there is hardly anything that impacts the lives of the poor after the elections. Even if crimes have been committed, the new regime does little to punish the law-breakers involved in corruption or genocide. *Our political history clearly shows that no member of the ruling political class will ever go to jail. All political crooks have been able to escape legal punishment.* Clever media management by corporates and communalists indeed protect class interests.

The Potential of Elections

The above does not mean that elections are useless. Elections display and celebrate the core principles of debate, plurality, tolerance, and free choice. They educate the electorate and this education is very important in a country where so many are still illiterate. Citizens become more aware of national issues and concerns like corruption, communalism, and even people's rights. *In recent years, several subaltern groups have increased their voting percentage, for they realise that elections are relevant for them.* The emergence of leaders like Mayawati, Ram Vilas Paswan, Prakash Ambedkar and a host of others from subaltern communities would have been impossible without elections. Political parties represent different social and economic interests, and politicians cannot simply ignore the people's aspirations if they want to be elected. The election logic compels parties to provide some solace to the poor and the deprived and listen to their woes. *Elections can also help the oppressed to develop bonds, form alliances and get organised.* **This is why it would be incorrect to view elections as mere rituals without possible gains.**

To make democracy more meaningful, the educated as well as the middle and subaltern classes must stop apologising for the limitations of the system and start demanding that the electoral process and the other democratic checks and balances be respected. They must become involved in making the whole electoral process (and democracy itself) as fruitful as possible.

Active opposition to abuses such as killings and arbitrary arrests or threats against whole communities (from whatever source) should be made a minimum qualification for any person or party to contest elections. The leaders of civil society should courageously expose the misdeeds of individuals and parties and work to educate and organise the people.

The 2009 National Elections

*Will the 2009 general elections be different and usher in changes that qualitatively redefine Indian politics? **That will depend on the electorate.*** The electorate as a whole would like to see democracy leap out from the ballot box into the real life of the people. The citizens want the government to establish the rule of law and prevent privilege groups, lunatics, fundamentalists and the moral police from taking the polity to ransom. They want the law-makers not to become law-breakers and the state to keep a principled distance from all religions and the personal lives of people. They want the state to respect the rights of individuals and groups, address people's problems, and promote the values enshrined in our Constitution. **Whether the elected government fulfills the people's aspirations will depend on the awareness and organisation of the electorate.** *An alert and active civil society can challenge the political parties and make them to act. Our country can still come out of its turmoil and promote genuine nation-building.*

Conclusion

Our democracy is full of weaknesses. *Yet, if we do not choose democracy, what is the alternative?* Will it be better if members of the military, industry or bureaucracy, or the educated, govern the country without popular mandate? **Certainly not!** *The dangers of abuses would still be greater! Without people's participation, no government can be legitimate. And elections remain the ultimate and inviolable source of the legitimacy to rule.* Even if elections are a form of ritual, participating in that ritual is important since elections confer the responsibility to govern to some people's representatives. The Indian elections have made the electorate more aware. **Though we are still very far from evolving a full proof system, elections are a must.**