

## Students' Views

### THE 2009 NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Towards the end of January 2009, some I and II MA students of St. Joseph's College, Bangalore were given a questionnaire on the forthcoming national elections (Box 1). They were invited to answer any of the questions, or to express their views as they liked. The 24 rather articulate respondents mostly belong to the middle and upper-middle income groups. Some of the answers are anonymous.

The following summary and quotations highlight the students' views on Today's Politicians, Parties and Elections, The Importance of the 2009 Elections, The Major Issues, and Expectations and Hopes. **Though this is not a scientific survey, these views may help us to reflect and take a stand.**

#### Today's Politicians, Parties and Elections

Though quite a few express their belief in democracy, **most respondents are very critical about politicians and political parties.** Only three or four mention something positive about them. *In fact, seven or eight of them explicitly state their loss of faith in the overall system.* The following passages voice the students' main criticisms.

\* Akshata writes: "I have a strong and deep faith in democracy. Elections are one of the means to realise democracy. *Unfortunately,*

#### Box 1. Questionnaire

- 1) Do you consider the forthcoming national elections important? Why or why not?
- 2) According to you, what are the main issues at stake?
- 3) What do you think of the respective stands of the UPA, NDA and Third Front on the major issues?
- 4) What differences will the outcome make for our country in the coming years?
- 5) What do you expect from politicians and parties at this juncture of India's history? Do you feel your concerns will be addressed by the 2009 elections?

*they have become a bane, not a boon...* This conventional practice has been religiously carried out, but it has lost its true face. *People have completely lost faith in the political system.* When will the political leaders do their duties responsibly?"

\* Amulya Prabhakar elaborates: "*Elections fail to serve the purpose of providing 'leaders' for the nation.* The failure may be attributed to numerous reasons. Extensive poll rigging discourages people from exercising their right to vote, as eventually their votes may not count. Today, many politicians have a criminal background. Most seem to enter the political arena for name, fame and money. They also introduce corrupt individuals into the system. *This leads to an absolute failure of the political system.* Because of the ineffective system, the most important issues of education, health and employment do not get the attention they deserve. The policies seem effective on paper, but the 'pay-off' in the implementation drains their potential... On account of their past experiences, *India's citizens have lost all hope in the leadership of whomever they elect.* Their 'grand' policies like 'India Shining' or even 'Bharath Nirmaan' have left the country in the dumps."

Amulya thus describes her perplexity: "I do not accuse only the political leaders for today's state of affairs, for youths like me are also to be blamed. *We, youths, love our nation but we are deeply disillusioned. We do not know what to do to help our nation's growth.* It seems we need sound guidance from older and more experienced people like our parents and teachers when it comes to any kind of political issues."

Amulya then concludes: "**I do not expect anything from our leaders or political parties.** All these years, our voices have been falling on deaf ears. It won't be a shock to me if, as usual, our concerns about communal harmony, nuclear deals, national security, recession and economic growth, are not addressed in this election. 'If' there is to be a change, I do not see it coming as yet. As Samuel Beckett said, 'nothing is happening, nobody is coming and nobody is going'. *In today's political scenario, this for me means that nothing positive is happening, no matter whom we elect.* All politicians and parties are the same. The entire election system is a farce that questions the relevance of democracy itself. *As a result, the nation is still waiting for leaders who can build a better future.*"

\* Arun G. Menon even feels that “*it is often the masses and the mobs who rule the country, rather than informed choice.*” Winston Churchill once said that, if you give freedom to India, it will be ruled by bandits, dacoits and thieves. The current political scenario is even worse. *Money power and muscle power prevail.*”

\* According to another student, “*politicians are corrupt. They don’t bother about people and their development; they think only of money, power and prestige.* They are eating the money of the poor and thus become richer. They don’t even pay their taxes properly.” She further remarks that she is not interested in “the dirty games of politics”, which harm education through strikes and patronage. Politicians involve students in elections by paying them; to carry on their sinister motives, they also want people to remain ignorant. Parties moreover fight against each other. “Their dogmatism and misuse of political power are holes which can never be filled. *Elections don’t make much difference and they are useless in the long run.*”

\* A few students briefly comment on specific parties or coalitions. According to Menon, “the Third Front seems too loose a coalition to survive for long”. Clarice observes that, in spite of its defects, the Tripura CPM enjoys the people’s blind faith and tries to keep it. They often win “because they are against capitalism and help the poor”. “The Congress on the other hand is lazy and never fulfills the people’s expectations.” Rebecca thus criticises the RSS: “They have adopted Hindutva tactics to suppress minority groups and Dalits in different states. They force women to wear the ‘mangal sutra’ and ‘sindoor’ as symbols of marriage, and Muslims to adopt Hindu names to prove their loyalty to the nation.”

\* **Zorinmawii, for his part, denounces party politics:** “*The root cause of our political stagnancy seems to be the game of ‘party politics’.* Each party is adamantly bent on opposing other parties and pursuing its agenda, no matter the consequences. Though the policies of various parties do not differ so much, there is no cooperation at any level for the greater good of the country. The political riots and communal terrorism, which are unfortunately becoming all too familiar, are in a sense the end results of what goes on inside and between the political parties in India. Politicians and parties must face this issue and learn to collaborate. There is however little hope, for *‘party*

*politics’ is deeply rooted in everyone’s idea of what politics is all about.*”

\* V. Lalhruaitluangi sums up: “*I have lost faith in politicians and parties, and even in their ability to put into practice their own policies and ideologies, which are mantras that they religiously preach in all their rallies and public gatherings before elections. They are quite accustomed to make empty promises.*” “Yet, I don’t want to brand all our politicians and parties, for **some of them have significantly contributed to foster development and a better life for people.** *But their good actions are rarely broadcasted by the influential media, which often focus on their mistakes.* Many of us, youngsters, have acquired a tainted image of our politicians and we no longer wish to voice our concerns and hopes, for we fear they will be drowned in the sea, along with many other voices that are hardly heard.”

### **The Importance of the 2009 Elections**

While acknowledging the importance of the forthcoming elections because of the crucial issues confronting our country, *most students are sceptical whether there will be any positive results for people’s lives.* **There are thus contrasting views on the 2009 elections!**

\* P.P. Sneha swims against the current by stating: “*In the recent past, many events have led to an erosion of faith in the democratic process.* The economic recession, the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the violence in Kandhamal, to name a few. However, relevant issues do not always become newspaper headlines. There are indeed important everyday issues, such as the lack of basic amenities, good education, and a decent standard of living. *The lack of awareness of such issues and the decision not to exercise one’s voting rights are also crucial issues!* **We must vote for people who will stand up and deliver.**”

\* Rupsikha Beypi adds: “With the major problems that our country has faced in the past five years, from communal riots to terrorist attacks, and from inflation to recession in the economy, this election is important for the progress of the country. Mr. Manmohan Singh was elected for his knowledge in economics, but there was no drastic change. We need a good leader who can motivate the youth, not

someone who is a puppet and always ailing. In short, *the nation wants a “man of action” rather than words.*”

\* Another student however holds very different views: *“The Indian Government today stands nowhere in relation to the common people and anything that could be called a ‘democratic governing body’ with any sense of responsibility towards the country and its people. And so, at this juncture, I don’t expect anything from politicians and parties. They won’t help. None of our concerns, problems or issues will ever be addressed.* Even if it were done, it would only be for some personal agenda or benefit. If a ‘sincere politician’ wants to do something good, the entire system will swallow him into its stride of corruption. *There is thus nothing special or hopeful about the 2009 elections.* The government has become just a profitable organisation that stands on the vulnerability of impressionable people.”

\* A student sounds rather resigned: “In any case, we do need a person to run the show. A company cannot run without a CEO, a ship without a captain, and a country without a leader. Even if we don’t want elections, how can a country function without a politician? *The country ultimately needs someone to address its biggest and most pressing issues.*”

\* Let us end this section with **a few more optimistic quotations.** Tejasvi adds: “Politics is important for it can either make or break a country’s future. The 2009 elections can bring a ray of hope by enabling the country to overcome the ongoing economic crisis. With the help of qualified economists, politicians and parties must study people’s problems and demands, find effective solutions and promote the overall development of the country. *If politicians can become less corrupt and more dedicated, they can answer at least some of the country’s concerns.*” And Gisen Varghese: “All parliamentary elections are important, because millions of people expect them to confront terrorism, corruption, unemployment and the economic crisis. *We must therefore take this election seriously and elect a powerful democratic government.*” According to another student, the 2009 elections “can open a new chapter in the political administration of India by providing a capable leader”.

## The Major Issues

No student makes an overall presentation of the major issues confronting our country today. As we already saw, many respondents however mention various issues while answering other questions. *They consider that the political process is itself a major issue. In addition, corruption, the economy (e.g. poverty, unemployment, lack of development, recession, etc.), terrorist attacks, and communal tensions are emphasised. These are the most frequently listed issues – about 12, 10, 8 and 5 times respectively.* Two or three students moreover speak of each of the following issues: violence, regional tensions, ineffective administration, regressive laws, rural development, misleading media, and the need for peace. *The issues of human rights, women’s empowerment and the environment are almost completely ignored:* only a single student mentions each of them!

Three brief quotations are worth adding here. Sangeetha Delampady states: *“At this juncture of India’s history, I would like politicians to focus on green energy.”* Another student observes: *“The problems of farmers stand out among my plethora of worries. Another issue that cannot be ignored is terrorism.* The problem of intra-terrorism needs immediate resolution.” Arun G. Menon adds: *“The problems of corruption, regressive laws, ineffective administration and communal politics are some of the real issues that need to be addressed,* but they are drowned in the communal and often anti-Pakistan rhetoric, which serves no real purpose. Most probably, human rights will also be a non-issue in the current electoral scenario.”

## Expectations and Hopes

**Several respondents finally describe their expectations and hopes, whereas others emphasise their almost complete disillusionment.** Let us listen to this wide variety of views and feelings.

\* Arun M.S. is convinced that *the forthcoming elections can bring about significant changes:* “I consider the 2009 elections not only important but also necessary. Generally, elections are meant to change governments and their policies, and to give new directions to the nation. There is no doubt that the UPA government has done a

great deal to improve the economic situation of the country and the living standards of the common man and farmer, but it has failed to tackle the important issues of terrorism and internal security and to prevent the losses of hundreds of innocent lives. The recent terror attacks in Mumbai are a solid proof of the UPA's inefficiency and inability in this field. It is only afterwards that the government passed certain anti-terror laws and security bills in the parliament; the UPA should not have removed POTA."

*"The 2009 parliamentary elections are very important. People should elect a forward-looking and strong government which will fulfill its promises and fight terrorism tooth and nail. The time has come to elect a new government which will ensure the security and safety of the nation and enact measures to create jobs and tackle the economic crisis. I am hopeful that the new government will be a ray of hope and a silver lining for millions of Indians."*

\* Arun G Menon however firmly opposes the enactment of stronger anti-terror laws: "Indian politics seems to have taken a drastic turn after the Mumbai attacks. Both the NDA and the UPA indeed favour more stringent laws. They want to give more power to the state than to individuals. Laws like POTA are regressive and draconian. They give absolute authority to the state, disregarding individual rights, in fact suspending them. People charged under such laws are held without trials, sometimes longer than their crimes (or sentence) would demand!"

*Menon ironically adds: "Is there anything to look forward to in these 2009 elections? Hopefully, the Third Front will not make Mayawati come to power. She would leech this country dry to throw a Rs 5000 cr birthday party for herself! Hopefully, the BJP (maybe with Modi in the lead) will not come to power. He would ensure an effective administration and a 'Shining India' at the cost of putting all non-Hindus in slave camps, or even of massacring, burning, hanging or just beating them to death – in short, a genocide that would have made Hitler blush! We are left with the Congress which is not a real choice at all. They would sell the country three times over, and if they could make a profit, they might sell their own mothers a well. Though all this sounds cynical, there are still a few good souls in Indian*

*politics, who are concerned about the nation and its state of affairs."*

\* Rajkumari Rebecca thus expresses her hopes: "I expect politicians and parties to build schools and hospitals in rural areas. Because children need to focus on education rather than being engaged in child labour. The terrible road conditions in urban areas should also be improved. *I want politicians to stop bribing people to get their votes, and to keep their promises and help people like us.* They should not be men of words, but men of actions." And Sangeetha Delampady: "*We expect politicians to be honest and to work for the country.* Instead of hoarding money, they must stop corruption. They have to be stricter in their supervising activities, so that there'll be no bribing or hoarding." Another student writes: "*I expect at least some level of transparency, honesty and of practising what one preaches."*

\* Tessy Thomas' reply is a mixture of disappointment and hope: "People's everyday needs are generally ignored in elections. The citizens thus suffer. India is said to be independent, but there are plenty of problems like unemployment and religious tensions. Terrorist attacks and religious quarrels can break out at any time. **Is this the India we long for? Not at all!** Politicians and parties clash among themselves and erode people's faith. *I pray that the forthcoming elections will bring some positive answers. May they bring deep peace.* Let them benefit the people and fulfill the purpose of democracy. Let the rulers come to the people, to the villages where India lives. *Live and let live; may India have a peaceful election, one that answers the people's major concerns.* We hope for a bright future."

\* According to Razukuono Thorie, "politics plays a significant role in nation-building. It creates our history. In a democratic and multi-party country, tensions and conflicts are likely to arise between parties. Religion is one of our most important problems in nation-building. *Communal riots and regional conflicts cause plenty of tensions.* Some political leaders, for example in the Gandhi family, were even killed for political reasons. *Our nation yearns to be liberated from terrorist attacks, territorial tensions, and communal riots.* Politicians are famous for building bridges where there are no rivers. The expectations of our citizens are often destroyed by the

empty promises of our political leaders. We hope that the 2009 elections will bring forward leaders who are more sensible in understanding and tackling the problems of the country. A single outstanding leader can do much to change the outlook of our nation.”

\* **But the pendulum of ideas and feelings also swings to the other extreme.** Y. Gayathri for example writes: *“It is foolish to expect much from politicians, for we know them well.* Their main defect is that they are not service-minded. Instead of tackling issues like the Mumbai terror attacks, they quarrel and blame each other. I don’t think our concerns will be addressed by the 2009 elections. The politicians haven’t changed for years and they won’t do it now. Yet, we would like someone like Obama who takes immediate action to tackle issues.”

\* Erlynne Christina Franklin voices the views of many by stating: *“Our politicians are known for their corruption. Most of them are power-oriented, not people-oriented.* They don’t serve the nation but their desire for power. Their behaviour in the parliament often exhibits an absolute lack of maturity. *Are such people capable of leading our nation? Why don’t politicians have a strict retirement age? Why not limit the number of times they can come to power? Why not ban for good those who are caught in corruption? Will the 2009 elections raise such issues? They may get addressed, but I see little hope for real change.”*

\* While more positive, *Tina Mary John remains rather sober in her assessment:* “Without the drive to build a better nation and improve the citizens’ lives, our elections are only a procedure without significant effect. In a complex country like India, with her large geographical spread, her cultural variations and traditional structures, the grassroots problems must be properly analysed. The nation’s leaders have to work hard to raise the standards of living of our citizens. In addition, the serious problem of corruption quells the hopes of the most idealistic young leaders. The lack of education and dedication of the current older political generation also deepens the immense obstacles that our nation faces. Our citizens themselves lack awareness and commitment. **The names of our political leaders change, but the nation’s problems basically remain the same.**”

### Concluding Words?

*Could these words of Kannika N. and P.P. Sneha serve as concluding words?*

Kannika N. thus expresses her convictions: “The 2009 elections are important because they are another opportunity for the people to exercise their freedom and their right to choose the leaders who will govern the nation. The development of any country is largely dependent on its government and leaders. Therefore, **making the right choice and electing a good leader should be an issue of concern for all of us.**” P.P. Sneha adds: “There are many expectations for the 2009 elections, especially in the light of recent events. But we may not see any immediate results. **Yet, it is important to vote and make at least that difference. We must be aware of this and act!**”