

## Vital First Steps

### Editorial for the special issue of "Public Eye" on citizens' initiatives in elections

Elections are the very lifeblood of a democracy. Honest and capable citizens freely chosen as their representatives and servants by voters in a fair election process constitute the essence of good governance. An election is therefore about 'who' get elected, 'how' the election is held and 'what' they do after the election. India is singularly fortunate in being able to fulfil the four essential conditions for being categorized as a liberal democracy, as outlined by Myron Weiner.

1. Government leaders are chosen in competitive elections in which there are opposition political parties
2. Political parties, including opponents of government, have the right to openly seek public support. They have access to press, freedom of assembly, freedom of speech and freedom from arbitrary arrest.
3. Governments defeated in elections step down; losers are not punished by winners; defeated leaders are not punished unless in the act of governance they have broken the law; their punishment is based on due process.
4. Elected governments are not figure-heads, they exercise power and make policies and are accountable to the electors - not to the military, the monarchy, the bureaucracy or an oligarchy.

Judged by these standards only a few nations - largely belonging to North America and Western Europe - can be classified as functioning democracies without interruption over the past fifty years. India belongs to this select group, and we can be justly proud of that achievement.

However, there is much that is wrong with our elections. Flawed electoral rolls have become a menace. About 40% errors are noticed in electoral rolls in many urban areas, and bogus voting in towns exceeds 20%, making our elections a mockery. Purchase of votes through money and liquor, preventing poorer sections from voting, large scale impersonation and bogus voting, purchase of agents of opponents, threatening and forcing agents and polling personnel to allow false voting, booth-capturing and large scale rigging, bribing polling staff and police personnel to get favours and to harass opponents, large scale violence and use of criminal gangs, stealing ballot boxes or tampering with the ballot papers, inducing or forcing voters to reveal their voting preferences through various techniques including 'cycling' etc, illegally entering the polling stations and controlling polling process - all these are an integral part of our electoral landscape.

Many scholars wonder how, despite such massive irregularities the electoral verdicts still seem to largely reflect public opinion, and how parties in power often lose elections. The answers are simple. Happily for us, though parties in power are prone to abusing authority for electoral gains, there has never been any serious state-sponsored rigging in most of India. The irregularities are largely limited to the polling process alone, and most of pre-polling activity including printing and distribution of ballot papers, and post-polling activity including transport and storage of ballot boxes and counting of ballots are free from any political interference or organized manipulation. That is why parties in power have no decisive advantage in manipulating the polls,

and electoral verdicts broadly reflect shifts in public opinion. However, the massive irregularities in polling process make sure that candidates who deploy abnormal money and muscle power have a distinct advantage. Sensing this, most major parties have come to nominate 'winnable' candidates without reference to their ability and integrity. Thus, the use of money power and muscle power are sanctioned by almost all the parties, and often they tend to neutralize each other. The net result is that candidates who do not indulge in any irregularity have very little chance of being elected. Election expenditure - mostly for illegitimate vote buying, hiring of hoodlums and bribing officials - is often ten or twenty times the ceiling permitted by law. Criminals have a decisive or dominant influence on the outcome in many parts of India, and have often become party candidates and won on a large scale.

Active monitoring and campaigning by non-partisan citizens' initiatives is critical to check the malpractices and bring in simple, but effective reforms. Inclusion of names of eligible voters in electoral rolls and deletion of ineligible names is, for instance, a simple, easy and remarkably effective measure within the existing law, through people's involvement. Minor procedural improvements like making available electoral rolls in every post office, and using them as centres for enrolling and deleting names will make a vast difference. Bringing pressure on political parties to select candidates through a democratic process involving members' voting, screening of candidates for criminal record or corruption and publicizing the findings, campaign for simple procedural changes like mandatory identity cards as a precondition for voting, and mandatory repolling if the tendered votes (sure proof of rigging) exceed a certain number or percentage, making information about candidates public, common platforms for candidates' public interaction facilitating probing questions, campaign to promote enrollment and voting and people's vigil on polling day are some of the citizens' initiatives necessary to cleanse our electoral process.

Public Affairs Centre initiated the successful 'know your candidate' programme in the municipal elections in Bangalore. People's movements like **Lok Satta** in Andhra Pradesh have made Election Watch into an effective State-wide movement challenging the legitimacy of the electoral process and forcing parties on the defensive. Praja and Agni in Mumbai have been mobilizing public opinion for better elections. Catalyst in Chennai launched an impressive media campaign to encourage people to vote. Happily, movements like **Lok Satta** have developed practical tools to make citizen participation in Election Watch a reality. All these and many more disparate initiatives should come together, share their experiences, forge links, and give a direction to the future of elections in our country. Parties and legislators have failed to respond to the challenge of electoral reform for over three decades. People's initiative and collective and informed assertion of our sovereignty as citizens alone can make our democracy real and meaningful. Cleansing our elections and engineering practical, but far-reaching electoral reforms are the first vital steps in our quest for rejuvenation of our republic and better governance. The time for action is now.

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