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Elections Make a Mockery of Democracy

BY **ASHISH KOTHARI** ON **02/11/2017** • **LEAVE A COMMENT**

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Gram Sabha meeting at Mendha Lekha village, Maharashtra. Credit: Vivek Gour-Broome

Elections are a violation of democracy. Our once-in-five-years pilgrimage to the voting booth is a mockery of what democracy should actually mean. Aghast? Hold off for a bit on your judgement that I'm off my rocker, anti-national, or in any case not worth reading further. Hear me out.

Democracy = demo (people) + cracy (rule). Rule *by* the people, not by a handful of representatives that people elect. There is a crucial difference. The original meaning stems from ancient Greek practice in which ordinary citizens (other than slaves and women) had a say in assemblies of decision making. This is akin to the notion of *swaraj* popularised by Mahatma Gandhi (though the concept pre-dates him), which integrates rights and responsibilities, autonomy and interconnectedness, ethics and politics. In modern societies, however, 'liberal' democracy hands over power to elected representatives, with very nebulous links between politics and ethics.

With elections, we violate democracy or *swaraj* in at least four ways.

First, in many countries including India, politicians get elected even if they have only 20% of the vote, with the rest of the electorate split amongst several opponents. This means that winners do not even represent the vast majority of people. As the American satirist Ambrose Bierce said in his *Devils' Dictionary*, the 'elector' is "one who enjoys the sacred privilege of voting for the man of another's man's choice". But even for the fraction of the population that is 'represented' by the elected politician, there is no guarantee that their will is his/her command. This is at least partly because they hardly represent even the electorate that votes them in; look at the figures of the background of winning

candidates in the 2014 general elections in India. Out of the 542 members analysed, 443 (82%) have assets of Rs 1 crore (\$160,000) or more (up from 300 that had such assets in the 2009 Lok Sabha); the average assets per member are Rs 14.7 crore (\$2.3 million), up from Rs 5.35 crore (\$830,000) in 2009. Do we seriously believe these men and women represent us?

Most importantly, day-to-day decisions, including crucial ones that impact a large number of people, are predominantly taken by elected politicians and the bureaucracy serving them, with little or no involvement of the electorate. Power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, a complete opposite of the democratic foundation of 'rule by the people'.

Second, elections promote the worst form of competitiveness, made increasingly divisive and hostile by the increasing commercial and political stakes of winning. Just as commercialised sport has engendered abysmal distortions like performance-enhancing drugging to enable staying ahead in the cutthroat competition, elections encourage the worst forms of bribery, corruption, intimidation and horse-trading. In a country like India, this competitiveness often plays itself out along historically-entrenched hierarchies and divisions, such as those of caste and of ideology (Right-Left being a universal one). Is it not a mockery of democracy that it takes a machinery of thousands of staff, police (sometimes the army) and volunteers to ensure that elections are peaceful, 'free and fair'?

Third, if elections are about democracy, they should be an occasion to discuss serious issues like poverty, deprivation, inequalities, casteism, ecological devastation, women's exploitation, land grabbing, farmer suicides, unemployment amongst the youth, declining public investments in education and health, citizens' rights and so on. Instead, candidates go after

each other like fowl in a cockfight, and there is little genuine, in-depth dialogue or discussion on issues. The 24×7, high-decibel media promotes this. When is the last time you heard a decent multi-party discussion on, for instance, what constitutes development and why it is that India's rank on issues like hunger and malnutrition remains amongst the lowest? If deeper knowledge and dialogue are crucial pillars of democracy, elections routinely discourage them.



Women of Deccan Development Society assert food and media control. Credit: Ashish Kothari

Finally, elections are based on the belief that the most important criterion of being rightfully in power and having the justification of ruling over others, is simple numbers. The majority, or whoever has the maximum votes, wins. Minorities and all those with fewer votes lose. These minorities have talents, knowledge, skills and abilities to aid in decision-making and governance; and they may have special needs that the majority should not overlook. The makers of India's constitution did recognise some of the dangers of majoritarianism and built in some safeguards such as reservations, but its ugly head regularly rears itself, as is

currently happening with the politics of the cow. Electoral politics provides it with powerful backing.

While I have mostly spoken about India here, the trend is global. Electoral fortunes of parties have varied over time in most countries, with electorates swinging between Right, Left and various formulations in the middle. Everywhere, though, one sees the four faults listed above, the spectacle of the recent American elections being only one of the more visible examples.

Finding a more representative model

What, then, is the alternative? Perhaps we can take a cue from villages in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra who say “our government in Mumbai and Delhi, but *we are* the government in our village”. Or citizens in Pune, Bengaluru and elsewhere who are asserting that they should be part of deciding the budgets and plans for these cities. Or from the Dongria Kondh Adivasis of the Niyamgiri hills of Odisha, who in unanimously rejecting mining proposals in their area have asserted that they would be the ones to decide on what constitutes ‘development’ affecting them. These and other examples point to a form of direct or radical democracy that is really about swaraj, in the sense of enlightened self-rule. Instances are found across the world, from large-scale ones like the Zapatista in Mexico to smaller ones like many indigenous peoples in all the continents. None are perfect but do provide far greater levels of participation in decision-making to ‘ordinary’ people than do electoral democracies.

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution of India were supposed to provide a foundation for such direct democracy, but their potential was severely limited (deliberately, I would wager) by the government retaining predominant financial and lawmaking and enforcement powers. They were also constrained

by the continuation of the same political and administrative boundaries as earlier, powered by electoral politics. Even village-level politics has remained subject to elections, with *panchayats* as elected bodies being more powerful than the *gram sabhas*, where all adults can represent themselves. Adivasi areas are on paper different, as the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act gives the gram sabha predominant decision-making powers, but in practice, this is routinely undermined by panchayat politics and government functionaries. The Adivasis of several villages in Gadchiroli have been able to overcome this by sheer people's power, and also by asserting that decisions will be taken by consensus or other methods that do not involve a majority-minority voting process.

Of course, such direct democracy can also be repressive and exploitative; and in any case cannot work at larger scales with too many people than can come together face to face. So there is indeed a need for delegated or representative institutions at a larger level, and for checks and balances against caste, gender and other repressions that come from a larger social consensus on basic human rights and justice. But even larger scale institutions can be based on principles and processes that do not reproduce the pitfalls of elections, for instance through measures such as the right to participate, the right to recall, nomination of delegates rather than divisive elections, their frequent rotation to discourage amassing of power and wealth, transparency of finances and decisions. Peoples' movements have brought in serious reforms in our democratic systems, such as the right to information. But we need a basic right to participate and decentralisation of financial and law-making powers. Elections of some kind may still figure in this complex of measures (an example of such a complex, multi-layered system could be Switzerland), but are not so central, and with serious reforms.

Finally, turning the gaze back upon ourselves, we as citizens need to accept part of the blame for the mess our democracy is in. We have been duped long enough by the illusion of elections as democracy, when will we take things into our hands as have the Adivasis of Gadchiroli? Direct democracy is hard, it needs time, capacity, effort, it is nowhere as convenient as going to the polling booth once in five years, and it means that we take both credit and blame for the impacts of decisions taken. Until we are ready for it, we will continue indulging in the escapism of elections.

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