

COMMENT

## What's in an election?



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**The significance of democracy does not lie just in the act of voting somebody to power, but in the way that power is exercised by those elected**

What do elections have to do with democracy? There seems to be a strong belief that a democratic society is defined by its elections. The principle of one person, one vote (with some conditions) is seen as a defining principle of **democracy**. This principle has become so dominant that it has successfully reduced the idea of democracy to a ritual of casting

votes. As a consequence, participation in democracy, instead of being a dynamic and continuous process, has been reduced to one act of voting, that too once in a few years.

By reducing democracy to this singular act, we have managed to build a society that is fundamentally undemocratic in character. Many have commented on the fact that the parties which speak for democracy have little democratic ethos within them. All the political parties are dominated by families or friends or, as is often the case now, business partners. Nepotism and exclusion are the basic working principles of our political parties. The latest drama in Karnataka manifests well all the problems of our democracy.

## Significance of voting

But what can democracy be other than enabling elections? To understand this, we have to first understand the significance of voting. What do we do when we cast our vote for one person or the other? Today when voting has become a business transaction where the voters are 'compensated' for their votes, what does voting really mean? And what does it actually accomplish?

The process of voting is extremely important. But its importance is not because it is about choice. Very often, we tend to mistake democracy with choice – the ability to choose between different candidates. The significance of democracy does not lie in the act of voting somebody to power but only in the way that power is exercised by those elected. Elections are a means of making sure that those who have power are accountable in some way and that they exercise that power in a democratic manner. The focus on elections as a sign of democracy is a classic instance of the means overtaking the ends. Elections are only a means towards the goal of controlling those who wield power, but instead they have become the end in themselves.

Thus, the essence of democracy is not really about the freedom to choose or the freedom to exert choice. Rather, it is primarily about how the elected wields power. The incorrect association of democracy with choice has even led to the absurd claim that the free-market economy reflects democracy. What has happened in India is that given the emphasis on choice as being equivalent to democracy, we end up choosing people who then govern most undemocratically.

So what then is the meaning of an election? What are we electing somebody for? We do not elect a person in order to give him or her the right to govern per se. Elections are important only because they are based on the fundamental principle that all of us have an equal claim

to the public goods in the society we belong to. This is equivalent to saying that all of us belong to a society equally and have an equal say in its governance as well as its wealth. A public park is public only because the park is 'owned' by all of us in equal measure. This means that the poorest person in a society has an equal share in the public wealth as much as the richest person has, in principle. When we vote somebody to power, we are not giving that person 'power' to do what s/he wants but we are merely choosing a person to take care of the 'public wealth' that belongs equally to all of us. Electing someone is merely choosing a representative to take care of our share of the public domain, and nothing more than that. The true act of democracy lies in how this job is done by this elected representative.

This is the principle of trusteeship that was so forcefully articulated by Gandhi and which even influenced businessmen like J.R.D. Tata. The elected representatives are merely trustees on our behalf and it is a primary duty of the trustee to make sure that they do not destroy what they are trustees of. This is the only meaningful implication of democracy, and it is precisely this character of democracy that has been completely destroyed in viewing elections as the essential act of democracy.

## About good governance

The idea of good governance also follows from this. What the elected representatives are supposed to do is to 'govern' only in so far as they are true to their task of governing on our behalf. To govern on our behalf is merely to take decisions and implement them so as to protect the common public goods that we all have an equal share in. But, most often, instead of being trustees, our elected representatives take our share of the public wealth for their personal gain.

The lack of a true sense of democracy in **politics** influences every other aspect of our society. Few of our institutions imbibe a sense of democratic functioning in this true sense. Private institutions anyway have little pretence of democracy since the private, by definition, has little sense of the shared trusteeship of the public. But we can demand some ethical conduct from the private because even the private needs a stable public space to be available for its existence. But whether in politics or in institutions which claim to be democratic, the demand is for much more than mere rituals of choice. That can only happen when it is power that is democratised, and not choice alone. While all of us recognise that sharing power democratically is difficult even in small organisations, let alone the government, we should also be aware that as long as the intentions of the person wielding power is that of a trustee, then there at least exists the potential to be democratic.

## Recipe for alienation

The people who vote belong to the political process only at the moment they vote. Once they finish voting, they no longer have any place in the democratic process. Any process that does this has no hope of truly being democratic. This is what has led to the deep sense of political alienation among the people. It is this political alienation which often leads to cultural alienation, which in turn leads to right-wing movements. If we want to get rid of most of the problems we are facing today, the first step is to make the political process truly democratic and inclusive. I am only echoing here what the common people have understood so well about elections today – that they really have very little to do with the ideal of democracy!

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