

**People Power****We, the middle class, must take to politics**

The low polling percentage in MCH elections – about 50% – has raised many eyebrows. Elections are the very lifeblood of a democracy. Honest and capable citizens freely chosen as their representatives in a fair election process constitute the essence of good governance. An election is therefore about ‘who’ get elected, ‘how’ the election is conducted and ‘what’ they do after the election. Elections involve organization of political parties, evolving a platform, mobilizing public opinion, campaigning to convey the message to the voters, and obtaining support to get elected. If effective public participation is absent, elections and democracy are reduced to a farce. Let us analyse the causes of low voter turnout and understand what we can do to encourage popular participation.

First, we must understand that polling percentages under Indian conditions are deceptive. Lok Satta’s surveys reveal that voter registration is extremely flawed. In urban areas in AP, about 26% of the names in electoral rolls are of ineligible, dead or fictitious persons, and need to be deleted. In Hyderabad city this percentage of wrongful inclusion is 22.3%. therefore any polling percentage should be calculated on a smaller base excluding ineligible votes. Among the eligible votes registered, the actual polling percentage is about 66%, which is not bad at all. That still leaves us with two problems. About 34% of those eligible and registered to vote have not voted. And there are some 16% or more eligible persons living in the city who are not enrolled as voters. Lok Satta mounted a campaign with MCH during November 16 - 30 to include and delete names in voter lists. The Election Commissions (EC) at state and national levels were very proactive but the citizens’ response was lukewarm, with only about 40,000 additions and deletions – probably 10% or less of what needs to be done! The EC has partially agreed at Lok Satta’s insistence to make the post office a nodal agency for voter registration, and make the process accessible. Under these circumstances, reduced polling percentage may actually mean declining false voting!

Second, many voters are repelled by the political process and inadequate choice of candidates. Parties have become private fiefdoms, and decent people increasingly shun politics. Muscle power, distribution of money and liquor, lacklustre and irrelevant campaigns put off many people. We should make political process more attractive, honest and people-friendly. Internal democracy in parties, choice of candidates through some form of primary elections, and interactive and civilized methods of campaigning like TV debates are needed to enthuse voters.

Third, many among the middle and upper classes have not internalized the notion of democracy – equality of human dignity and principle of one-person, one-vote. There are many who stay away from the polls for fear of having to rub shoulders with their domestic servants! Unless we all recognize the dignity of labour, and respect each individual regardless of birth and occupation, we cannot build a democratic or peaceful society. We should realize that our security and well being lie in the prosperity and dignity of all. As Lincoln put it succinctly, a nation divided against itself will fall.

Fourth, there is growing cynicism about the outcome of elections. Many people feel that no matter who wins the election, we, the people, end up losing! While the poor still vote to express their anger, or show their relevance at least for one day, or because they get paid for the votes, the middle and upper classes shun polls. But it is dangerous to ignore politics and elections. As Plato said, "the punishment suffered by the wise who refuse to take part in the government, is to live under the government of bad men." The only antidote to the ills of a democracy is more and better democracy. By staying away, we are only ensuring the victory of crooks and fools and perpetuating a vicious cycle.

Finally urban people fail to recognise the importance of local governments. The businessman, the bureaucrat and the academic feel comfortable dealing with a centralized government extending patronage to cities. There is aversion to local politics. We fail to realize that all governance is about people, and all politics is local. In villages, people understand the value of local governments, and take greater interest. We need to recognize that the city government matters. Rudolph Guiliani made a spectacular difference to New

York city as a Mayor. His leadership, skill and commitment revived a city on the brink of collapse. The key to success is that he had the power to make a difference. With local governments emasculated, we fail to give them importance. We need to genuinely empower the city government and establish the links between our vote and public good; our taxes and public services; and authority and accountability. Only then will people be enthused.

Now that election is over, we need to take city governance seriously. Ward committees in each locality with share of taxes and control over staff will make all the difference between decay and rejuvenation. Citizen's Charters compelling timely response and compensation for delay will work miracles in delivery of services. Local justice through speedy procedures, right to information, and a strong and independent ombudsman are ways to bring life back to the city and make citizen the centre of our political process. We need to stand up and fight for these. If we don't care, nobody will. Certainly the rapacious politician and corrupt bureaucrat will not care to improve things. Let us begin with our locality and city, and the country will take care of itself.

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