

BETTER ELECTIONS FOR HEALTHIER DEMOCRACY - ROLE OF VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS

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Introduction

Election is the only weapon in the hands of the weak and the excluded to influence something significant for their life either as positive choice or strong protest. Though generally considered poor and unaware, voters in India have shown extreme wisdom in exercising their franchise. But this is mostly in punishing wrong doing rather than in seeking better governance or development. Of all forms of accountability it is the electoral accountability which has been exercised quite sharply.

As the poor do not have much choice to vote with their feet; they can only vote with their hand and that too once in five years. In the inter regnum they are mostly ignored pushed around and often cheated. Therefore improving elections is really empowering the marginalized. But for this to really happen, it should be an informed voter exercising his or her right in a free manner in a fair election.

Freedom in elections indicates much more than fearlessness; it includes understanding of issues, capacity to guess the post election scenario and most important, appreciation of the fact that the vote is only the starting point and more active participation is required post-elections. Fair elections indicate the clean process of conduct where the level playing field is maintained for all voters and candidates and handicaps are removed in respect those who face them.

Over the years, elections have become less a contest of ideas and more a kind of horse race between parties and sometimes and even between personalities. This distracts the voters and perverts the logic of democracy. Elections should provide for a healthy debates on development ideas so that they offer an opportunity to the voter to reflect on the nature of development and be clear on the kind of development which he or she needs or wants.

It is often forgotten that, of all the activities in the public sphere participation is the highest in elections and freedom is relatively more. Also the fact that local government elections are more important is often ignored. It is the sacred duty of everyone to nurture local democracy as roots are the most important part the tree of democracy.

It is unfortunate that, in most of the States in India, local governments particularly Village Panchayats are not adequately empowered. Their constitutional status as the third tier of governance in charge of local economic development and social justice is not reflected in practice. The simple fact that there is no developed nation in the world without an active local government system is not even discussed. If the voter does not perceive the connect between local democracy and local level development, then the sanctity of local elections declines.

Text books show four broad conceptualizations of elections; first is the idealistic one which sees it as a process of truth seeking, the second with its liberal over tones sees it as a competitive method of selecting leaders, the third sees it as populist mobilization and the fourth one focuses on processes. Probably a combination of these four ways of seeing elections would be a better indicator of the nature of the elections.

Stakeholders

Obviously citizens have the highest stake in elections in a democracy because they would be entrusting their governance, including the power to take decisions in allocation of public resources to the persons of their choice. But they have little say in the conduct of elections. In this scenario the most powerful and critical stakeholder would be the State Election Commission (SEC). Fortunately the laws of the land, actively supported by the judiciary, give huge responsibilities and matching powers to the SEC. It is permanent and powerful and has a role in all stages right up to the formation of new elected governments. It is the only truly non-partisan stakeholder which has highest level of information, knowledge and experience. In a sense it is also the most pro-active stakeholder. It's important roles are:

- Laying down and enforcing code of conduct for all the other stakeholders.
- Educating the people on their rights and responsibilities in democracy in general and elections in particular.
- Be transparent and communicative
- Not only be impartial but seen to be impartial through open and transparent decision making on published norms and principles of fairness.
- Actively partner with other stakeholders and be their friend, philosopher and guide.
- Be an umpire who can enforce the decisions including deterrent action wherever required.
- Assure the highest confidentiality
- Ensure security of all stakeholders.
- Regularly conduct studies – pre and post elections for lessons to continually improve elections

The roles of other stakeholders are enumerated below.

Political Parities

They are the most active and probably and most significant influence on the way elections are conducted. They need to be mature and make elections revolve around real development issues on the basis of credible manifestos. Political education of the voter is their domain.

They have to announce their plan of action to maintain the code of conduct and regularly inform the public on how they are doing it. They have to be totally transparent in their functioning and dealings. They should also be vigilant and bring to notice of the State Election Commission any possible deviant action by any stakeholder.

Media

Much before elections, the media need to play the role of highlighting the functions of local governments and discuss their performance. In a larger sense, it has to sensitize people on the important role of local governments in democracy and development.

In respect of elections, more than any other stakeholder, the media can influence the understanding and behavior of voters. Of course media has its stands and preferences. But during elections it needs to be totally impartial and give fair coverage to all the candidates and parties. It can provide the information people require about the processes and procedures of elections – and possible run question and answer columns. More than personalities it needs to highlight issues so that there could be impartial agenda setting for the elections. Of course media, particularly visual media would be the most effective forum, for healthy debates and discussions. It could also serve as the voice of the voter in communicating with the State Election Commission and also vice versa. It has also a watch dog function. In extreme cases even sting operations to expose corruption in elections may be necessary. The more neutral media is the more effective its contribution to democracy would be. At the same time they are the most effective campaign platform for candidates and parties.

The social media, particularly with its anonymous, acrimonious and aggressive aspects has the potential to mislead and misdirect. It can confuse people and inject irrational fears and partisanship. While freedom of expression needs to be upheld at all costs there has to be a healthy surveillance of negative inputs probably by a multi-partisan body. Tracking social media and intervening to prevent misuse is going to be a delicate task. At the same time the State Election Commission and other stakeholders like Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should also use the social media effectively to bring in the right perspective and take the sting out of vicious propaganda.

Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

They need to highlight the importance of local governments in the lives of people and sensitize voters to take the election seriously. They can connect with voters better and educate them on the larger objective of the democracy of elections with special focus on social justice. They can actively ensure inclusion of different marginalized groups in the election process. They can reduce manipulation of voters by providing balanced information. They can bring together the candidates on a common platform to explain what they would do post elections. They can act as people's observers and watchdogs and silently or openly keep the State Election Commission informed of all slippages and wrong doings. They can interface with other stakeholders and bring in higher level of discussions on the issues of rights and duties of different stakeholders within an ethical framework. They can facilitate a kind of public action against electoral malfeasance. NGOs and CSOs can be more effective as networks or, at least, as platforms.

Of course they have the basic task of ensuring that every person exercises his or her rights as a voter by educating the voter on the importance of the vote and ensuring no vote is wasted.

Academia

Unfortunately local governments, particularly Panchayats, have not been a favorite of academia. Though academia cannot be seen as a direct stakeholder, they can conduct research particularly after elections on different aspects. In partnership with State Election Commission they can hold seminars and symposia. More importantly they can conduct evidence-based studies on democracy and local governance to nudge policy makers.

State Institutes of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj have a special role to play. They need to incorporate courses related to elections in their regular training programmes for elected representatives and local officials. They can get into issues related to development and democracy and good governance, people's participation and social inclusion.

Corporates

While corporates can develop a collective code of conduct for funding political parties and candidates, they can also do the following:

- Provide CSR funding to academic institutions, NGOs and CSOs for work related to free and fair elections
- Sponsor general advertisements on free and fair elections.
- Sponsor educative programmes on elections in the visual media in cooperation with the State Election Commission.

Community Based Organisations (CBOs)

With the expansion of the livelihood programmes, networks of Self Help Groups (SHGs) of Women have sprung up all over the country. They represent the bottom half of the population and are fairly inclusive. They meet regularly and federations of SHGs exist at the village and cluster levels. Over the years these organizations have acquired huge social capital. There is evidence that ordinary women undergo a process of empowerment enabling them to understand their rights and responsibilities and to confidently voice their demands. These SHG networks can certainly activate Grama Sabhas which are critical institutions of direct democracy sanctified by the Constitution but routinised in practice. Functional Grama Sabhas become the foundation of vibrant, participatory democracy.

The SHG networks have Community Resource Persons (CRPs) and these CRPs could be used by the SEC to spread awareness about different aspects of elections. They could function as real citizen observers and democracy animators.

Because of the organized nature of the SHG network with clear channels of upward and downward communication, outreach become easier for the SEC. These networks are the best vehicles for citizen education which is best done much before the election season starts.

Conclusion

As is clear from the points made above, the SEC has a special role as the coordinating stakeholder and having the power to push every other stakeholder to play out their role fully. An activist approach would be the most rewarding. Only SEC can have the ability to perceive elections holistically and systematically and use inherent powers sanctified by tradition and law. Therefore the SEC needs to be fully empowered. Some of the essential powers to be given to SECs include:

- i. A clear role in delimitation of constituencies as gerrymandering contributes significantly to unfair elections.
- ii. Decide on reservation and rotation of seats which is also critical for social inclusion.
- iii. Issuing and enforcing rigorous code of conduct
- iv. Empowering a range of Observers including from among CSOs.
- v. Having full disciplinary control over election staff.
- vi. Seeking and verifying affidavits from candidates covering different aspects like ownership of assets, involvement in criminal cases, etc.
- vii. Scrutiny of election accounts and power to take punitive action.

SEC should have a continuous capacity building programme covering all aspects of elections, local governance and inclusive democracy targeted at all stakeholders. This could include distance education and also a knowledge portal.

Local Government elections are very important. It has to be ensured that real choice of the people will be respected. People will vote if they perceive that the results would be for the common good. It is also an exercise of the precious right to decisively exercise their choice and should be seen as the stepping stone to larger participation in civic life as citizens.

To get the feedback on the different processes associated with the life cycle of an election including the roles of different stakeholders, it would be an interesting innovation if a kind of Social Audit of election could be arranged by the SEC. The core methodology of Social Audit is now well developed. It needs to be adapted for use in a post election scenario. This would strengthen people's faith in electoral democracy and undermine those who seek to manipulate or distort it for narrow, nefarious interests.

Social Audit involves a kind of public hearing and people get an opportunity to speak out critically and constructively. It will help restore their faith in democracy if failings are brought to public notice and concrete action is taken against perpetrators and system reformed to prevent their repetition. All the stakeholders can be given roles in this collective exercise in free enquiry, frank discussions and firm and fair conclusions.

