

Some Electoral Thoughts

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With the parliamentary elections under way, we are facing one of the biggest exercises in democracy. It is inevitable that we through this process to elect a body that will govern the country for the next five years.

In the recently concluded US election, which captured worldwide attention, the results came in as a big relief amidst the economic meltdown. The new President is expected to put the much ruined US economy back on its rail. The expectations are naturally high, and as we have seen





in the past, it would remain so for the next two or three years before beginning to drop. The future would always have new hopes and opportunities in store, and would demand fresh faces to convert them to a reality. Now it is the turn of the world's biggest democracy. Unfortunately here, we are encountering the same old hopes and faces, but in new and uncertain combinations.

The dominant feature is that the distinction between party and individual has little or no clarity. It maybe a multi party democracy, but in reality it is the individual who plays the major role. Elections are ideally contested on the basis of manifestos each party produces. However, hardly anyone bothers to study these manifestos, as there is nothing

new or attractive in them. At best it resembles the prospectus of a company eager to raise money from the public. Unlike a company prospectus, the manifestos never publish risk factors. Factual information on each candidate about his political, social, public and financial backgrounds would have helped in a qualitative assessment of his candidature and abilities.

Theoretically, we accept that a political party is an organisation of people who agree on the implementation of certain common minimum programmes for the welfare of the country and its people. It is not only a common ideology, but also the willingness to work together towards a common goal that brings them together. Such common goals should be

made known to the public well in advance of the election.

Party work in India is not a part time job unlike in other democracies. Naturally that brings up the question of survival of a party worker. Because he is doing a job for your benefit, do you compensate him? But then he is not the only one; there are hundreds like him in the same constituency. Do you have to support them all?

In the first place, most of the political parties do not have a written constitution. People devote their time and effort because of their positions and expectations. If nothing is available, they might be willing to change sides. This proves that ideology and loyalty do not go together. Directly or indirectly we are all supporting

this fact. And we continue to support them because we earnestly hope that at some stage, they would contribute to our well being and welfare.

We are supposedly proud of the multi party democracy in India. The government is elected directly or indirectly by the citizens under a free and fair electoral system. This reality has to dwell on the voters, as much as it must on those seeking power. There must be a clear and unambiguous answer to the question of whom to elect. The election manifesto must answer this in the larger perspective, and the individual candidate who seeks to represent the people must satisfactorily convince them of his all round eligibility. The opportunity of an objective evaluation of the candidate or the party must be available to the voter.

The prevailing methodology suggests us to believe that we are electing the party and not the candidate. Having relegated the importance of the individual, it assumes the complexion of an ideological war based on election manifestoes. But the irony is that we do not give much importance to the manifestoes though it usually must hold the key to the election. More over, people have no effective control over their elected representatives. There is no method by which the voter can effectively monitor and force the elected representative to deliver on his pre-election promises and commitments.

The concept of moving on to



the chair of governance is even more curious and confusing. Prior to the election, parties promise certain alliances to form the government if they win, but once the results are declared, these promises vanish. People, who elect a candidate with a view to keep a particular party or combination out of power, suddenly find that the candidate or the party they voted for has decided to support the very same party they wanted out of power. Or the candidate they elected defects from his party and joins another one to grab power. Legally if such a defection is supported by a certain percentage, then the defectors are considered as separate party and their election is not set aside. But what happens to the poor voter, and the vote that he cast with a purpose, and based on a pre-poll promise?

Politicians know very well that they have to fight within their party to exist, fight the next in command to retain their posts, fight the top leadership to get party tickets to contest, fight an

election^a It is a relentless fight for survival. In the process, they become suspicious of every thing. The hunger for power gets them into all kinds of desirable and undesirable acts. But the system as he knows well, furnishes him with enough loop holes to crawl out of messy situations.

It is said that criminals understand the language of politics, and politicians understand the language of criminals better than anyone else. The difference between the two is such that it makes us wonder what the real distinction between the two is!

This severely limits our options. It also negates important features of democracy, where power is supposed to be held directly or indirectly by the citizens under a free and fair electoral system. Unfortunately we have neither a legitimate choice nor a post-poll control on the future happenings. And to add to it, is the fact that the elected government would not even be the choice of the majority!