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BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN

While free and fair elections are a necessary condition for a healthy democracy, they are not sufficient. A healthy democracy must provide good governance that responds in a timely fashion to the concerns of all its citizens, including those on the margin, says BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN.



It is proof of the Election Commission's efficiency that in a relatively poor country, with a large number of voters being illiterate, free and fair elections are held with regularity.

In the next two months, India will hold again, for the fifteenth time, the largest elections in human history, for 543 Lok Sabha seats, spread over five days. Competing in the political space for popular support from some 714 million voters, is a rich spectrum of political parties — eight national, 47 State, and eight others, besides a plethora of over 700 unrecognised parties.

These staggering figures barely do justice to the stupendous task of organising the elections. They reflect the enormous size and rich diversity of India's population and its aspirations, consisting of 28 States, eight major religions, and 23 official languages.

This diversity is reflected in the Indian Parliament, which has moved steadily away from one or two dominant parties, become more fragmented, and since 1999 has posed the challenge of building effective and durable governing coalitions and alliances with a coherent agenda.

Power shift

The shift of power away from one or two large national parties has been a striking long-term feature of the political system. This reflects the inability of the larger national parties to reform and revitalise themselves, take advantage of increased connectivity, and reach out to an increasingly enlightened population.

The State parties have grown in number and influence, and have increased their bargaining power in the system, responding to State and local aspirations and concerns. This trend has been reinforced by a growing disenchantment with the larger national parties.

The Indian political system has, by and large, been able to integrate and accommodate the wide

variety for languages, cultures and religions present in India in a dynamic and mutually respecting manner that the European Union is only now beginning to resemble.

Of course there are challenges to be overcome, but we must not discount what has been achieved over six decades, especially in the context of South Asia.

The US elections in 2008, in the most powerful democracy, offered the voter a choice of two parties, with diversity of opinion subsumed within this bivalent structure. This has proved largely sufficient to accommodate the diversity of the US population, though there have been many efforts at creating alternative political forces. The much larger diversity of India's population, in terms of language, religion, and culture, requires a broader canvass to accommodate this diversity within a federal system.

Back in time

At this historic juncture, we should recall that 2,500 years ago, the first democratic constitution known to mankind was elaborated by Cleisthenes the Athenian in 508 BCE. Cleisthenes organised citizens into ten tribes according to their area of residence, or local constituencies and established legislative bodies run by individuals chosen by lot, rather than kinship or heredity.

He reorganised the Assembly, with 500 members, and the court system. Cleisthenes may have introduced ostracism (first used in 487 BC), whereby a negative vote (negative vote or *ostrakhi*, exercised by casting a black disc instead of a white one) from more than 6,000 of the citizens would exile a citizen for 10 years. The idea was to vote against or "blackball" a citizen deemed a threat to the democracy.

Citizens the world over have high expectations from democracy, in terms of finding sustainable solutions to their problems, and reacting to their concerns. It must not be forgotten that elections and political parties are only the means to the end of quality governance.

There is a growing degree of disconnect and disenchantment with political parties and governments due to perceived low standards of governance.

Cynics often claim that one party and authoritarian systems of government can provide better, more efficient and responsive governance, while providing some space for differences in views within a restricted political framework. But on sustainability and accountability, these provide little assurance. Certainly they cannot accommodate diversity such as India's to the same extent as democracy.

Seen in this context, India's general elections are an inspiring beacon for democracy the world over. Therefore, our elections have a significance that goes well beyond our borders, and give hope to people across the world suffering under repressive and authoritarian regimes.

The outstanding performance of our Election Commission in organising such a gargantuan exercise in a near perfect fashion is indeed highly praiseworthy. It is a resounding proof that even in a relatively poor country, with a large number of voters being illiterate, free and fair elections can, and have, been held with regularity.

Good governance

While free and fair elections are a necessary condition for a healthy democracy, they are not sufficient. A healthy democracy must provide good governance that responds in a timely fashion to the concerns of all its citizens, including those on the margin.

Indeed many democracies in the world fail this test, leading to voter apathy and the feeling that "it doesn't make a difference", and outbursts of violence against the establishment. But while a developed country can afford the luxury of poor governance, for a developing country such as India, poor governance would condemn a large number of its citizens to a longer period of substandard living conditions. We certainly cannot afford this.

One of the problems in many democracies is the lack of effective regulation of the way political parties function, apart from elections. The conduct of elections is usually well regulated by an independent electoral commission.

However, on fundamental and difficult issues such as financing of political parties, internal governance and democracy, selection of candidates, accountability, and transparency, political parties are largely left to regulate themselves, with occasional disputes going to the courts.

In India, this has led to unhealthy trends of criminalisation, violence, sectarianism, and lack of interest on the part of well-educated and qualified persons entering into political life.

There is a need for norms that establish standards and values for the healthy functioning of political parties, with an independent regulator to enforce them, and a strong independent media to expose violations.

Obviously such systems must be the product of consensus and acceptance by all players. This requires a good level of enlightened leadership among the political parties. It will greatly reinforce public confidence and participation in political life.

Strict impartiality

The Election Commission has been affected by recent controversy, and its functioning will be scrutinised by watchful eyes and the public. But it is hoped that in the future, it will live up to its sterling reputation and be strictly impartial and seen to be so. Two thousand five hundred years after the democratic experiment in Athens, the basic challenges facing democracy are the same, albeit on a larger scale. The same human weaknesses that plagued ancient Athenian democracy — pathological greed, dishonesty and short-sightedness continue to plague us today.

What, then, should the voter do when faced with a choice among candidates thrown up by the political system? Certainly he should not abdicate his responsibility to cast a vote. This would be a vote against democracy.

He can and should inform himself of the background of the candidates, assess for himself which one would be the best for the country, and vote accordingly.

This is one time when the voter is the employer, and the candidates are the potential job seekers. Would you not like to choose the best person for a job which you are paying for? Then go out and vote.

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