

Price of democracy

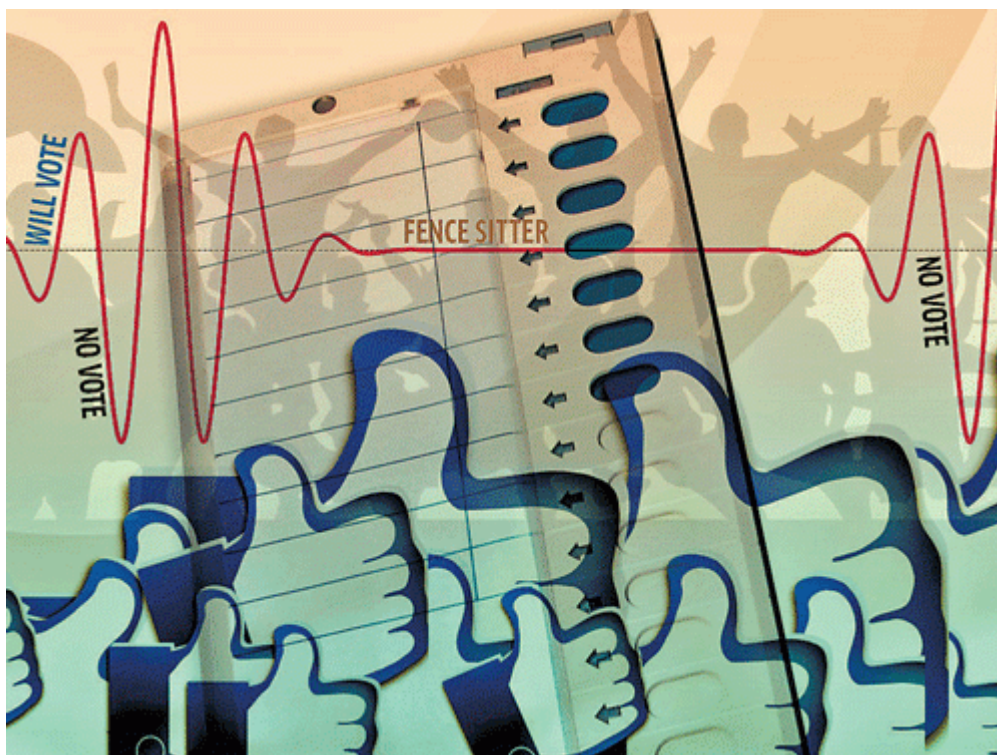
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Most of us have keenly followed every antic and slip of the would-be members of our 16th Lok Sabha, Only a dilemma is on what basis to choose the candidate to vote for. DH graphics

For a long time urban Indian voters have been accused of being apathetic towards the right to vote. But we know that in these elections there is no voter apathy. Only a dilemma — on what basis to choose the candidate to vote for? An astounding majority is undecided because they are unhappy with the choices they have. Shefali Tripathi Mehta attempts to feel the pulse of voters.

When the three women in the house sit down for a cup of tea and chitchat, I broach the topic of the upcoming elections. I ask if they have decided who they will vote for. We are each other's confidantes.

Unhesitatingly they tell me. Both these women, my house-help, have studied only up to middle school and have since early marriage, worked to supplement their family incomes, mainly so their kids may study in English medium private schools. They are committed money savers and enthusiastic Mahila Sabha participants.

I am surprised by how clear, how plain their choices are, unaffected by issues that do not concern them directly. The one who votes for the hand has done so all her life. Her loyalties will never change, she tells me. The other shares the anxiety of the majority today — rising prices, lack of basic amenities like roads, water and electricity. Hers is clearly the anti-incumbency vote.

And I, presumably the most well-educated and informed among us three, am sadly dithering. Mine is the dilemma of the urban, Indian voter who has witnessed the drama of Indian politics and followed the steady decline of a nation that was on the verge of being a global power. Mine is the dilemma of the informed voter — that, we perhaps know too much.

Information glut

Is information then my bane? In the run-up to this crucial mandate, the 24x7 media has chucked all news that would have had them frothing at the mouth in favour of surveys, debates, report cards and analysis of candidates, constituencies and political parties.

Most of us have keenly followed every antic and slip of the would-be members of our 16th Lok Sabha. Some politicians have landed themselves into controversy by opening their mouths and others for refusing to do so; someone got a head start by crying on camera while another was chastised for thinking with his heart.

Like unwilling horses to water, we have been led to opinions by shouting-hoarse TV anchors and alerted by the bold red tickers flashing news of deserters; of shifting allegiances; of politicians not getting tickets from their chosen seats; and of those that are being sent to their political kala pani.

Their undersides have been on show as much as their clean kurtas. We have let the chapati on our dinner plates go cold as we flipped channels for the hottest political development of the day. We have gulped down brazen statements — one leader saying people living in refugee camps cannot vote; another asking his party men to vote twice. We have seen politicians straddling the fence and being pulled in from one side or the other — falling on their faces into unbelievable alliances. We have tut-tut-ed over ticket tizzies and missing manifestos.

Winds of change

In the midst of all this surfaced the story of how we, the people, are being bamboozled by the media; that 'paid news' is a reality; that candidates pay money to media for favourable coverage and that stakeholders in the elections have high stakes in media companies. Who do we trust?

Eight hundred million voters cast their mandate in these elections, of these a 100 million are new voters. Most agree that the key election issues this time are price rise, corruption, development and communalism. But what most want to know is far from this — Modi's wife, Rahul's girlfriend, Kejriwal's children are presumably the most googled searches. The news only feeds us what we ask for.

That freedom and democracy came to us after a long and arduous struggle is now a matter of history. We have always had these and take these for granted. In 1977, when the Janta Party got a landslide victory and India elected its first non-Congress government, Morarji Desai became prime minister. The political developments of the day had not left me, not yet 10, untouched and a family joke has since hounded me. It so happened that one evening, father pointed at a rainbow to me and said, 'Look Indra-dhanush!' Confused, I asked him if it isn't called a 'Morar-dhanush' now.

Back then, when every person considered it their sacred duty to vote, Election Day was not another chutti to sleep in. There was immense nationalistic pride in going to vote. It was a national festival when women wore their crispiest cotton saris and there were jalebis for breakfast. Even watching the ink on parents' fingernail slowly move up and disappear was significant.

But somewhere along the years, as politics acquired the prefix 'dirty', disillusioned urban Indian voters began to distance themselves from it. For a long time we have been accused of being apathetic towards our right to vote. But we know that in these elections there is no voter apathy.

This change was brought about largely by the anti-corruption movement that began in 2010 when India Against Corruption unravelled the Commonwealth Games Scam and burst open a deluge of corruption scams.

On April 5, 2011, when anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare began a hunger strike at the Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, people of this country, tired of corruption and lack of development, saw hope. Because the movement was non-violent and non-partisan, the cynics kept their voices low. From political corruption to bringing back the country's black money stowed away in Swiss banks, the issues it asserted struck a chord with millions of countrymen who lent support to the movement unhesitatingly, wholeheartedly. This movement became the ferment of the awakening of the urban Indian voter.

In 1974 too, a similar impassioned movement had gripped India when Jayaprakash Narayan called for a peaceful 'Total Revolution' against hunger, oppression, corruption and injustice, and the Lok Nayak had roused the people of the country with his vehement opposition of Emergency the following year.

Choice to choose

In the younger days of the democracy, loyalty to a political party was sacrosanct. My mother did not speak with my father for one whole day because angry with ‘their own’ party’s inefficiency, he had for the first time, voted for another. We did not judge our neighbours or family friends on any other grounds except if they were supporters of a different party. As a young girl, I had once held a miniature tricolour and stood along the road to watch Mrs Indira Gandhi in her open cavalcade.

As she passed us by, as was customary, Mrs Gandhi threw garlands at the public and a neighbourhood auntie had jumped with joy when one landed right into her hands. Auntie’s excitement had seemed brazen to me because she was a Janta Party supporter.

Today, most people have no such political affiliations. So I ask everyone I can, on what basis would they choose the candidate to vote for? An astounding majority is undecided because they are unhappy with the choices they have. But since they do not want to forfeit their right, they will choose, they said, the ‘lesser evil’. All parties seem to have been tainted by the same brush — having given tickets to candidates with questionable credentials.

Very few voters have a clear decision to vote-in a particular party or candidate; most are working backwards by elimination. Where are the good men that were promised? Political parties that have gone back on their word even before elections, can we trust them to do any better, after? Isn’t that how the cliché goes, the more things change the more they remain the same? This election is significant though for the electoral reforms introduced. The first was the ruling that an MP or MLA would be disqualified immediately after being convicted in a serious offence and sentenced to two or more years in prison.

The other was to allow casting a negative vote ‘none of the above’ (NOTA) to let the political parties know that candidates fielded by them are not worthy of our vote. But NOTA, in effect, is merely not choosing a candidate and does not register a rejection of the candidates. I ask a friend who says he might choose NOTA and he says that though he does realise that it is a vote ‘wasted’, but enough of NOTA choices will sooner or later send a strong message across to political parties.

So the churning has only just begun. If making of a democracy was hard work, keeping it isn’t easier. Four phases of elections are already over. Karnataka goes to poll on April 17. There is no denying the fact that we are at the threshold of a historic mandate. Each one of us is a participant and “true victory is the victory for democracy and pluralism”.

Exercise your franchise because, “At the bottom of all the tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into a little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper — no amount of rhetoric or voluminous discussion can possibly diminish the overwhelming importance of the point.” (Winston Churchill)

