

## OPINION

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## Representative democracy



DEMOCRACY IS not merely about electing representatives nor about the winner taking all. So far our view and practice of democracy has been limited to voting periodically as if it is the means and the end. Free speech, free press and freedom of association are necessary but not

sufficient conditions to strengthen democratic culture. It is the representative character of the electoral process and performance of those democratic institutions which dictate the extent and character of democracy. The electoral process and a free press (media) are the two basic institutions which are indicative of the velocity of a democracy. How representative are these institutions of the people of the country? How effective are they in fulfilling obligations and objectives?

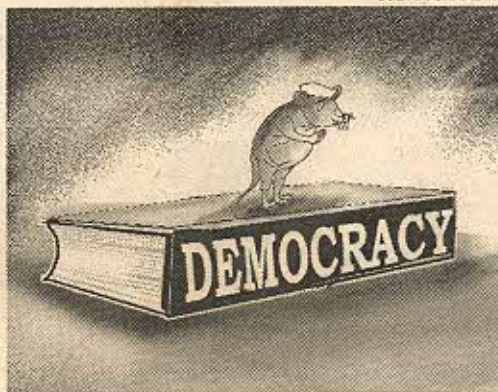
On three counts the electoral process has not come up to the expectations of a democratic system over the years. The first, the fragmentation of the polity, continues to cause frequent uncertainties (instability) in the functioning of legislative bodies. The second, the representative character of the electoral process, has remained low and static. In fact, the winners in elections, both in the case of the Lok Sabha and the Assemblies, hardly represent a quarter of the total voters. Thirdly, yet, even now one or the other political party continues to come to power more or less on party lines rather than representing various sections/regions. As a result, the credibility of elected governments, of elected leaders and of the efficiency of their performance has declined.

The decline of the representative character of the electoral process should be particularly emphasized. In the last ten elections to the Lok Sabha much less than half of those elected were with less than half of the votes polled. This is despite increased education levels and economic prosperity. It is even worse in the case of state assemblies. The principal party heading the government in the states hardly received 40 per cent of the votes polled. This in turn accounts for much less than a quarter of the total voters. In fact, the principal party heading the government in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and

Orissa – the ones least developed – has the voting support of hardly one-fifth of the voters, even assuming that voter's lists are comprehensive enough. In Uttar Pradesh, in 48 of its 85 Lok Sabha seats, the one elected received less than 35 per cent of the votes polled.

Despite a change in the demographics and lowering of the voting age (to 18 from 21 years) in 1989, the percentage of voter turnout remained almost static over the 14 general elections for the Lok Sabha, at much less than 60 per cent. Also, women voters, while they comprise nearly half of the total votes have a very low share in the state assemblies and the Lok Sabha – not even 15 per cent. The higher voter turnout in the municipal elections in Jammu & Kashmir last fortnight is an exception.

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The preoccupation of political parties has been with numbers, splitting communities and compromising on whatever ideology otherwise proclaimed on "at any cost" rationale. Thus, ideology no longer differentiates parties. As a result caste and community, on the one hand, and money and media power on the other, have become the deciders of the electoral outcome, not so much the concern or performance in terms of larger goals of the Republic. In the process, personalities rather than parties and image rather than performance have become the factors of democratic process. The irony is that this situation is not changing visibly for the

better as could be expected with increased educational levels, economic prosperity, exposure to the media and significant ease in conducting elections (in terms of proximity of voting booths, time needed to caste the vote, ease in voting, etc).

Party centric elections are being extended to panchayat elections at the Zilla, Block and village levels thereby fragmenting the very process. "Partyless democracy" seems more relevant today atleast for local boards. "Partyless" does not however mean negation of political parties. The contests will be more on issues, needs and aspirations. Perhaps it is time that we reconsider such a system for local bodies.

The press (mass media) in India is as free as in any democracy and, irrespective of inadequacies, has been a pillar and guardian of democracy in the country. But in terms of realizing the goals of the Republic it could be far more concerned and reflective of the realities. One-third of the adult population is still deprived access to all mass media and the content of the news media deals more with politics and corporates than civil society. Advertising has of late become the driving force rather than equity and developmental concerns of the country.

As democracy is under a political party-centric trap of the electoral system, the mass media is under a "rating trap" where what interests matters more than what is in the interest of readers/viewers. The mass media is concerned and pre-occupied with those having "deep pockets" and immediate gratification rather than larger and long-term implications. If this is how the two most important institutions of a democracy – the electoral system and a free press – operate, how will democracy get consolidated and meet larger goals of the nation? No wonder that enthusiasm is flagging in electoral politics in so many different ways even among the educated and to the extent of certain political groups opposing the very system of elections and even democracy. And, why has the overall reach of the mass media stagnated despite all that proliferation and growth in the media. That is how a larger section of the people today remain "untouched" and "unaffected" by the basic institutes of democracy. ■

—The author is chairman, Centre for Media Studies