

ELECTORAL POLITICS

The time is after midnight. An expectant crowd sitting for the past five hours in a chowk of the town is waiting for its leader to come. The organisers assure and reassure the crowd that he would be here any moment. The crowd stands up whenever a passing vehicle comes that way. It arouses hopes that he has come.

The leader is Mr. Devi Lal, chief of the Haryana Sangharsh Samiti, who was to address a meeting in Karnal on Thursday night. The 76-year old leader, is a very busy man these days. His day starts at 8 a.m. and ends after 11 p.m. ... he had already addressed nine election meetings since morning... been constantly addressing public meetings for the past 23 months and preparing for this election.

WHY ELECTIONS?

1. **Test of Haryana:** assembly election in Haryana in 1987. The State had been ruled by a Congress party led government since 1982. Chaudhary Devi Lal, then an opposition leader, led a movement called 'Nyaya Yudh' (Struggle for Justice) and formed a new party, Lok Dal. His party joined other opposition parties to form a front against the Congress in the elections. In the election campaign, Devi Lal said that if his party won the elections, his government would waive the loans of farmers and small businessmen. He promised that this would be the first action of his government.

The people were unhappy with the existing government. They were also attracted by Devi Lal's promise. So, when elections were held, they voted overwhelmingly in favour of Lok Dal and its allies. Lok Dal and its partners won 76 out of 90 seats in the State Assembly. Lok Dal alone won 60 seats and thus had a clear majority in the Assembly. The Congress could win only 5 seats.

Once the election results were announced, the sitting Chief Minister resigned. The newly elected Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of Lok Dal chose Devi Lal as their leader. The Governor invited Devi Lal to be the new Chief Minister. Three days after the election results were declared, he became the Chief Minister. As soon as he became the Chief Minister, his Government issued a Government Order waiving the outstanding loans of small farmers, agricultural labourers and small businessmen. His party ruled the State for four years. The next elections were held in 1991. But this time his party did not win popular support. The Congress won the election and formed the government.

An election is a contest organized between different political parties for getting people's support.

The party which gets the support of the largest number of people comes to power and forms the government.

In a representative democracy election is a mechanism by which people can choose their representatives at regular intervals and change them if they wish to do so.

In an election, the voters make many choices.

- (i) They can choose persons who will make laws for them.
- (ii) They can choose persons who will form the government and take major decisions.
- (iii) They can choose the party whose policies will guide the government and law making.

2. **Why do we need Elections?:** A rule of the people is possible without any elections if all the people can sit together everyday and take all the decisions.

In an election the voters make many choices:

- (i) They can choose who will make laws for them.
- (ii) They can choose who will form the government and take major decisions.
- (iii) They can choose the party whose policies will guide the government and law making.

3. **What makes an election Democratic?:** a simple list of the minimum conditions of a democratic election:
- (i) First, everyone should be able to choose. This means that everyone should have one vote and every vote should have equal value.
 - (ii) Second, there should be something to choose from. Parties and candidates should be free to contest elections and should offer some real choice to the voters.
 - (iii) Third, the choice should be offered at regular intervals. Elections must be held regularly after every few years.
 - (iv) Fourth, the candidate preferred by the people should get elected.
 - (v) Fifth, elections should be conducted in a free and fair manner where people can choose as they really wish.
4. **Is it good to have Political Competition?:** Elections are a means to gain power and positions of influence in the government. In a nation with over 1,000 million population, there may be a few millions who nurture these aspirations and ambitions. These aspirations and ambitions can be fulfilled only if they get successfully elected as people's representatives. Since the number of representatives to be elected is fairly very small there is cut throat competition among the aspirants.
- Electoral competition is like a competition at any market place. In a market, business firms fight each other to gain consumer's confidence. Those firms which are in a position to gain this confidence taste success. Those who fail finally have to withdraw from the market. Competition, therefore, complete adoption of consumer friendly practices.
- Same is the case with the electoral competition. Different political parties have to work to gain voters' confidence. They may successfully hoodwink voters once or a couple of times. But this game cannot go on indefinitely; finally, every politician, or a political party, would have to show results and live upto voters' expectation. This is what political or electoral competition ensures, and this is the strength of competition.
5. **Demerits of Political Competition:** The system of elections gives rise to political competition. Political competition has its own costs:
- (i) It creates a sense of disunity and factionalism.
 - (ii) Different political parties and leaders often use dirty tricks to win elections.
 - (iii) Parties and leaders often level allegations against each other.
 - (iv) This pressure to win electoral fights does not allow sensible long-term policies to be formulated.
 - (v) The environment created by competition dissuades many people to enter the political arena.



WHAT IS OUR SYSTEM OF ELECTIONS?

Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha (Assembly) elections are held regularly after every five years. After five years the term of all the elected representatives comes to an end. The Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha stands 'dissolved'.

Elections are held in all constituencies at the same time, either on the same day or within a few days. This is called a general election. Sometimes election is held only for one constituency to fill the vacancy caused by death or resignation of a member. This is called a by-election.

Mid-term election is an election held to constitute a new house if the legislature is dissolved before its full time.

Universal adult franchise implies that any person who has attained 18 years of age has a vote. There is no 'discrimination on the basis of caste, sex, religion, etc.

- 1. Electoral Constituencies:** In our country we follow an area based system of representation. The country is divided into different areas for purposes of elections. These areas are called electoral constituencies.

The voters who live in an area elect one representative. For Lok Sabha elections, the country is divided into 543 constituencies. The representative elected from each constituency is called a Member of Parliament or an MP.

One of the features of a democratic election is that every vote should have equal value. That is why our Constitution requires that each constituency should have a roughly equal population living within it.

Each state is divided into a specific number of Assembly constituencies. In this case, the elected representative is called the Member of Legislative Assembly or an MLA. Each Parliamentary constituency has within it several assembly constituencies.

The same principle applies for Panchayat and Municipal elections. Each village or town is divided into several 'wards' that are like constituencies. Each ward elects one member of the village or the urban local body. Sometimes these constituencies are counted as 'seats', for each constituency represents one seat in the assembly.

- 2. Reserved Constituencies:** A true democracy provides equal opportunity to all individuals and section of society to take part in elections get elected and share in the governance of the economy.

However, due to various historical, social, cultural and economic reasons, a section of the society has remained backward. It constitutes the weaker section of the society.

The weaker section constitutes, by and large Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and women.

This system of reservation was extended later to other weaker sections at the district and local level. In many states, seats in rural (panchayat) and urban (municipalities and corporations) local bodies are now reserved for Other Backward Classes (OBC) as well. However, the proportion of seats reserved varies from state to state. Similarly, one-third of the seats are reserved in rural and urban local bodies for women candidates.

- 3. Voter's List:**

(i) What is Voter List?: In a democratic election, the list of those who are eligible to vote is prepared much before the election and given to everyone. This list is officially called the Electoral Roll and is commonly known as the Voters' List.

All the citizens aged 18 years and above are eligible voters.

Every citizen has the right to vote regardless of his or her caste, religion or gender.

Persons with unsound mind and criminals can be denied the right to vote.

Election Photo Identity Card: Every eligible voter (i.e., whose name appears in the voters' list) is being issued an identity card by the government. This contains the photograph of the voter. The card serves as a mark of identification at the time of polling of votes.

(ii) Need to Know?: Educational Qualifications for Candidates.

4. Nomination of Candidates: Anyone who can be a voter can also become a candidate in elections.

Any citizen of the minimum age of 25 years can file his nomination. Filing the nomination means he can present himself as a candidate.

Every person who wishes to contest an election has to fill a 'nomination form' and give some money as 'security deposit'.

Recently, a new system of declaration has been introduced on direction from the Supreme Court. Every candidate has to make a legal declaration, giving full details of:

- (i) Serious criminal cases pending against the candidate;
- (ii) Details of the assets and liabilities of the candidate and his or her family, and
- (iii) Educational qualification of the candidate.

This information has to be made public. This provides an opportunity to the voters to make their decision on the basis of the information provided by the candidates.

Classification of Candidates: Candidates contesting an election can be classified in two groups:

- (i) Independents, i.e., those individuals who contest elections on their own.
- (ii) Party candidates, i.e., those individuals who contest elections as a nominee of a political party.

"Most candidates are fielded from political parties." Party candidates enjoy many advantages over independents.

- (i) When a candidate represents a party, it is easier for voters to know what he stands for. So a person voting for a party candidate knows what he is voting for.
- (ii) Modern electioneering is a cumbersome process. It needs huge organisation to manage it. Individuals cannot mobilise resource for this type of organisation, parties can and they do mobilise resources.
- (iii) Electioneering means campaigning in different forms and in different parts of a constituency. An individual cannot organise these but a party can.
- (iv) On the polling day polling booths have to be set up and manned by volunteers. Political parties can easily manage it.

A political party is geared to and has necessary resources to contest elections. Hence, individuals seek to be part of a political party.

5. Election Campaign: Election is all about choosing a representative to the legislature and/or the government. Before a judicious choice is made, voters need to be informed about:

- (i) Who is a better representative?
- (ii) Which Party will make a better government?
- (iii) These pieces of information are put together in an election campaign.

Candidates and/or parties

- (i) Contact their voters.
- (ii) Address mass gatherings/political meetings.
- (iii) Mobilize their supporters.

In a battle for voters' vote, competition gains heat.

In election campaigns, political parties try to focus public attention on some big issues. They want to attract the public to that issue and get them to vote for their party on that basis. Let us look at some of the successful slogans given by different political parties in various elections.

- The Congress party led by Indira Gandhi gave the slogan of Garibi Hatao (Remove poverty) in the Lok Sabha elections of 1971. The party promised to reorient all the policies of the government to remove poverty from the country.
- Save Democracy was the slogan given by Janata Party in the next Lok Sabha election held in 1977. The party promised to undo the excesses committed during Emergency and restore civil liberties.
- The Left Front used the slogan of Land to the Tiller in the West Bengal Assembly elections held in 1977.
- 'Protect the Self-Respect of the Telugus' was the slogan used by N. T. Rama Rao, the leader of the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh Assembly elections in 1983.

Restrictions placed on election campaigns by law: It is necessary to regulate campaigns to ensure that every political party and candidate gets a fair and equal chance to compete.

According to our election law, no party or candidate can:

- (i) Bribe or threaten voters;
- (ii) Appeal to them in the name of caste or religion;
- (iii) Use government resources for election campaign; and spend more than Rs.25 lakh in a constituency for a Lok Sabha election or Rs.10 lakh in a constituency in an Assembly election. If they do so, their election can be rejected by the court even after they have been declared elected.

Model code of conduct for election campaign:

- Use any place of worship for election propaganda;
- Use government vehicles, aircrafts and officials for elections; and
- Once elections are announced, Ministers shall not lay foundation stones of any projects, take any big policy decisions or make any promises of providing public facilities.

Election Manifesto : A party's manifesto states its programme of action before it campaigns for votes among the voters.

- (i) A manifesto tells the voters what the party thinks about major issues of internal or foreign policy, and promises to do certain things if it is voted to powers.
- (ii) It explains why does the party agree or not agree with the government.
- (iii) It must also tell the voter about what it is going to do if it wins.
- (iv) A party which is in government tells voters why it acted the way it did.
- (v) Election manifestos are important documents. Parties are judged by these.

Importance of Symbols in Elections: Political parties have usually well-known symbols. Normally, a person recognises a party instantly from its symbol. Symbols are allotted by the Election Commission so that every candidate has a different symbol and the voters do not get confused.

6. Polling and Counting of Votes:

- (i) On the Election Day, every person whose name is on the voters' list can go to a nearby 'polling booth', situated usually in a local school or a government office.
- (ii) Once the voter goes inside the booth, the election officials identify her, put a mark on his finger and allow him to cast his vote. An agent of each candidate is allowed to sit inside the polling booth and ensure that the voting takes place in a fair way.
- (iii) Earlier the voters used to indicate whom they wanted to vote for by putting a stamp on the ballot paper. A ballot paper is a sheet of paper on which the names of the contesting candidates along with party name and symbols are listed.
- (iv) Nowadays electronic voting machines (EVM) are used to record votes. The machine shows the names of the candidates and the party symbols. Independent candidates too have their own symbols, allotted by election officials. All the voter has to do is to press the button against the name of the candidate to whom he wants to give his vote.

- (v) Once the polling is over, all the EVMs are sealed and taken to a secure place. A few days later, on a fixed date, all the EVMs from a constituency are opened and the votes secured by each candidate are counted. The agents of all candidates are present there to ensure that the counting is done properly. The candidate who secures the highest number of voters from a constituency is declared elected.
- (vi) In a general election, usually the counting of votes in all the constituencies takes place at the same time, on the same day. Television channels, radio and newspapers report this event. Within a few hours of counting, all the results are declared and it becomes clear as to who will form the next government.

WHAT MAKES ELECTIONS IN INDIA DEMOCRATIC?

We get to read a lot about unfair practices in elections. Newspapers and television reports often refer to such allegations. Most of these reports are about the following:

- Inclusion of false names and exclusion of genuine names in the voters' list;
- Misuse of government facilities and officials by the ruling party;
- Excessive use of money by rich candidates and big parties; and
- Intimidation of voters and rigging on the polling day.

To overcome these type of situations we established an Election Commission, who is responsible to conduct free and fair elections in the country.

- 1. Independent Election Commission:** In our country elections are conducted by an independent and very powerful Election Commission (EC). It enjoys the same kind of independence that the judiciary enjoys. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is appointed by the President of India. But once appointed, the Chief Election Commissioner is not answerable to the President or the government. Even if the ruling party or the government does not like what the Commission does, it is virtually impossible for it to remove the CEC. Very few election commissions in the world have such wide-ranging powers as the Election Commission of India.

- EC takes decisions on every aspect of conduct and control of elections from the announcement of elections to the declaration of results.
- It implements the Code of Conduct and punishes any candidate or party that violates it.
- During the election period, the EC can order the government to follow some guidelines, to prevent use and misuse of governmental power to enhance its chances to win elections, or to transfer some government officials.
- When on election duty, government officers work under the control of the EC and not the government.

2. Popular Participation:

- (i) People's participation in election is usually measured by voter turnout figures. Turnout indicates the per cent of eligible voters who actually cast their vote. Over the last fifty years, the turnout in Europe and North America has declined. In India the turnout has either remained stable or actually gone up.
- (ii) In India the poor, illiterate and underprivileged people vote in larger proportion as compared to the rich and privileged sections. This is in contrast to western democracies.
- (iii) Common people in India attach a lot of importance to elections. They feel that through elections they can bring pressure on political parties to adopt policies and programmes favourable to them. They also feel that their vote matters in the way things are run in the country.

- (iv) The interest of voters in election related activities has been increasing over the years. During the 2004 elections, more than one third voters took part in the campaign-related activities. More than half of the people identified themselves as being close to one or the other political party. One out of every seven voters is a member of a political party.



3. Acceptance of Election outcome:

- (i) The ruling parties routinely lose elections in India both at the national and state level. In fact in every two out of three elections held in the last fifteen years, the ruling party lost.
- (ii) In the US an incumbent or 'sitting' elected representative rarely loses an election. In India about half of the sitting MPs or MLAs lose elections.
- (iii) Candidates who are known to have spent a lot of money on 'buying votes' and those with known criminal connections often lose elections.
- (iv) Barring very few disputed elections, the electoral outcomes are usually accepted as 'people's verdict' by the defeated party.

4. Challenges to free and fair elections:

A few candidates may win purely on the basis of money power and unfair means. But the overall verdict of a general election still reflects popular preference. There are very few exceptions to this rule in the last fifty years in our country. This is what makes Indian elections democratic.

Questions of this kind bring the many limitations and challenges of Indian elections to our attention. These include :

- Candidates and parties with a lot of money may not be sure of their victory but they do enjoy a big and unfair advantage over smaller parties and independents.
- In some parts of the country, candidates with criminal connection have been able to push others out of the electoral race and to secure a 'ticket' from major parties.
- Some families tend to dominate political parties; tickets are distributed to relatives from these families.
- Very often elections offer little choice to ordinary citizens, for both the major parties are quite similar to each other both in policies and practice.
- Smaller parties and independent candidates suffer a huge disadvantage compared to bigger parties.

These challenges exist not just in India but also in many established democracies. These deeper issues are a matter of concern for those who believe in democracy. That is why citizens, social activists and organisations have been demanding reforms in our electoral system.



ELECTIONS ARE THE BAROMETER OF DEMOCRACY

Elections are rightly said to be the barometer of democracy.

- (i) It is through elections that the people give expression to their opinion.
- (ii) It is through elections that the persons who have to work as representative of the people are identified.
- (iii) Any unpopular government can be unseated in an election.
- (iv) Elections help in maintaining an effective control over the executive.
- (v) Elections are the time when it is possible to debate publicly on various socio-economic issues. Different issues and subjects of concern come to the fore.
- (vi) The true character of social and political workers comes out during the election campaign. The real worth of individuals can easily be adjudged.

In short, a fair and free election is indicative of the healthy and robust democracy.

ROLE OF AN OPPOSITION PARTY IN A DEMOCRACY

The opposition in a legislature represents the legitimised dissent of the people.

An opposition party plays a significant role in a democracy.

- (i) It acts as an alert watch-dog.
- (ii) It exercises a check on ill-considered legislations.
- (iii) It helps check the slackness of the government and its various departments.
- (iv) The members of the opposition can move adjournment motions, cut motions, and vote of no-confidence, with the aim to highlight any major governmental failure or acts of omission.
- (v) The investigative commissions set up to enquire into alleged cases of corruption or negligence of duties have members from the opposition parties also. This ensures that they act in a fair and unbiased manner.