

Why Vote?

By Dr. Mangala Gowri M S

Assistant Director

Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University

Why vote? It is not unusual to find this sentiment being expressed. When we use the expression 'not unusual', there is no exaggeration because even for a high voting percentage of 75, one out of every four subscribes to this line of thinking. Of the three who do vote, discounting the ones who vote on caste lines, religious overtures and patriarchal dictates there isn't much left to be counted as ethical voting. Every five years, this opportunity ordained by our constitution comes to us; and we let it go, perhaps unaware of its import. Swear we do whenever we would. Vote we mostly don't; at least not in the manner we should!

Many reasons have been attributed to the low voter turnout in elections. Despite the good work done in maintaining a healthy electoral roll, it is often found that many voters are far away from their place where their names appear in the voter list when it comes to the day of voting. Many have their names in the place of their permanent domicile; and have not cared to find out if they are eligible to vote where they are normally resident. Ironically the legal provision is that your eligibility (and duty) to vote is where you are normally resident (and not at your permanent 'non'-residence). Your voting right (and duty) exist where you 'normally rest in the night'. With the Election Commission being swift in the process of adding, deleting and shifting names in the electoral roll, it is relatively safe to assume that you can shift your name to where you can and must vote.

Apathy regarding political issues and an acquired indifference of the urban population to the systemic instruments of democracy are often cited as among the main reasons why people don't vote. Another factor is that politics is generally treated as an arena of the old by the youth and they stay disconnected from the political stream. There is also a noticeable absence of women in the voting process in some areas. They do not find the intricacies of politics appealing; and cannot perhaps care less. Many of the women who do come out to vote are remote-controlled and their participation is at best an attestation of the assertions sought to be made by the males in the family. Vulnerability arising from financial constraints or social position is another deciding factor in voting. If threatened or cajoled, a common man might desist from voting or vote under pressure. Objectivity of the process is lost and enfranchisement instead of becoming an empowering right gets reduced to an unwanted burden.

Then there is the most widespread reason, probably the one cutting across geographical, caste and other conceivable boundaries - the disillusionment resulting from a non-responsive system. A desperate conviction that nothing will ever change for better. When our votes do not hold any tangible value, people do not just bother to take the trouble to go to the polling station. Again, a vote given to a losing candidate is perceived as a vote wasted in our first-pass-the-post system. When none of the candidates fall within the consideration zone of the voter, the decision might be to just abstain.

A perusal of the voting percentage in various states in previous elections shows an interesting result where the more developed states have shown an above-average voting turnout compared to those states that are not known for development. Though there is no concrete evidence on vulnerability factors in the less developed regions, anecdotal instances do indicate a lack of social independence equivalent to political independence there. In the chicken and egg puzzle of if development leads to more voting or vice versa, one is free to take sides.

The issue of political independence brings us to the question as to why we should vote. The first reason of course being our duty towards the democratic ethos. While exercising this duty, we are in fact exercising the right to be heard. This very right to speak out is one of the fundamental tenets of democracy. A right not just to be heard; but to decide as to who will rule us goes down the drain when we do not vote. So does the right to life (with dignity)!

What if my vote goes to the losing candidate? Even if our vote falls into the share of the losing candidate, we are defining our character as a voting population. Any leader representing a 'voting population' is probable to be more responsive than the one representing a mute population. An electorate will be identified by its habit of voting, no matter to whom they cast their votes. That is to suggest that, apart from the duty and right to vote, there is a clear profit angle for the need to vote. We stand to benefit from registering our participation in the electoral process. This conveys to the representative the need to take us all seriously.

Once this habit is established, those hedge sitters who do not vote out of sheer apathy at present may start casting their votes. And when they do vote, since they tend to be more neutral to the pseudo-divisive-factors, they tend to favour the better candidate. When the politician recognises that the electorate is in the habit of high electoral participation, he would be more responsive to the needs of the population as a whole. He cannot overlook any one, as all of them are voters - and not just mute spectators. Whenever there is a higher voting percentage, the better candidates would sense a better opportunity to win - as there would surely be more neutral voters who would have cast their votes. A habit demonstrated by the electorate that "it votes" would help keep the elected representative in check during his five-year tenure as there is always a possibility that when "it votes" again, it votes against the incumbent. That is, a higher voting percentage can give a better chance to a better candidate; and it also has a chance to make a candidate turned representative better!

What if I want to boycott the election? A boycott might be a result of insurgency or even

disillusionment. It might even be publicity mongering. It might be a pressure tactic. The interesting point is that a boycott is a perfectly legal way of participating in the election process, but it is often mixed up with apathy when the boycott is not registered as a boycott. It is in this context that section 49-O of conduct of election rules, 1961 comes into picture. The provision of 49-O is recognised as a matter of procedural detail by some. Most people fail to appreciate the philosophical backdrop of the provision which includes the right to register a refusal to vote in the electoral process. It is an opportunity to record your dissent by refusing to vote. That is also voting, albeit voting against all the available candidates. The Supreme Court has recently directed the Election Commission to put this option on the EVM as the None of the Above (NOTA) option. This improves awareness and corrects the issue of identity disclosure that existed earlier in the exercise.

For the time being we do not have a system where elections need to be repeated if those registering dissent under 49-O is more than the votes polled by the majority candidate. But democracy is an evolutionary process and this can be weighed upon and considered in the next round of electoral reforms.

One may again argue that if it is about registering your dissent, why take all the trouble to go to the polling booth - a normal 'don't go to the polling station' would also convey the same message! The main reason behind registering your dissent is that this leads to a feeling in the representatives that people are in the habit of voting (independently) or at least going into the polling booth to register electoral intention; and thereby has a high probability of voting for a good candidate when the opportunity comes. Voters boycott the election process in the hope of influencing the thought process of the powers that be whereas the reality is that in the case of a boycott it is an equal negative to all the participating candidates; and thereby it is of no consequence whatsoever to the candidates. It is also possible that the so-called boycott is understated - as people feel that some of it might be result of apathy to the election process rather than any sincere subscription to the boycott agenda.

In a scenario where the option of 49-O is given proper publicity, the insurgent elements who call for a boycott would have to really exert themselves in getting the boycott registered in the election process. The key point is that election process involves a right to refuse to vote apart from the right to vote. Education of voters on this point can increase the participation in the election process especially by those abstaining from the process due to youth disconnect, urban apathy and a general frustration towards the system.

Only a vigilant master can cultivate the habit of vigilance in their servants. To be a vigilant master, not only should one develop the habit of voting, but also learn to vote objectively. There is in fact a need to demonstrate the objectivity in voting habit. When voting is done on the basis of liquor supply on the eve of elections or on the basis of the farman of the village head, the next five years will give concrete roads leading to the fields of the head man and the others waiting in slush for their elusive rations to arrive. The corruption that netas 'have to do' to stay in power is mostly a result of the proclivity of voters to base themselves on unethical and illogical considerations. This creates a need for candidates to leverage those who can mobilise political support for no ethical rhyme or reason - god-men and hit-

men. A good way to fight corruption is to ask people to vote and vote ethically - without being swayed by such cronies, who would have to be subsequently fed by the netas - to stay in power! Again, when one votes at the instance of another, the second individual is voting twice; and the first one is not voting at all!

By casting votes in a neutral manner the voter would prompt the public representative to view a citizen approaching him as an individual - with a secular liberal first-name-based identity than try and manipulate responses according to the convenience associated with the colour shade of the second names. It will also incentivise the actions of representatives, which are in favour of all and one. The behaviour of the neta in power and the character and efficiency of the administration under him are more a function of the percentage of ethical and logical voting than that of any inherent quality in the individuals concerned.

Voting for electing our representatives is almost similar to what you would do if you had to elect a pilot just before a flight. Would you base your decision on nepotism, caste-ism, money, muscle or muskan power? Would you allow others to do so without a murmur? Or would you go for the most competent hand in an objective informed manner. Would you have your vote- 'Volition Objectively and Totally Expressed'! Why not VOTE?

(Originally published in governancenow.com, 2013)