



## Why I did not vote

Exercising your right to vote every five years is not democracy, a genuine participation at every level of decision-making is, says [Ashish Kothari](#), outlining ways to make this possible



***Elector: one who enjoys the sacred privilege of voting for the man of another's man's choice.***

-- Ambrose Bierce, ***The Devil's Dictionary***, 1911

Now that the national elections are over, and the admirable fervour of public-minded citizens exhorting everyone to register their vote is behind us, I can write this. I did not vote. I never have, and I'm now 48, which means I've given up several opportunities to bring in a government of my liking.

Why have I been so irresponsible a citizen? Laziness? Well, partly. But more than that, a deep cynicism about national elections as a meaningful mode of democracy, as something that can actually help bring in a government of my liking...or one that would best serve the interests of the Indian public. I respect the faith with which hundreds of millions of people engage in elections, especially because for most of them it is the only chance to influence something at the state or national level. But this is precisely the problem with our democratic model, which makes me stay away from elections.

Our democracy is framed in the Westminster model taken from our former colonial masters, with very few changes to 'Indianise' it. This model puts all its weight behind the assumption that the candidates chosen through a one-person one-vote system will truly represent the public, indeed will **serve** this public. This is a touching, but seriously flawed assumption. Surely the repeated failures of our governments, of whatever hue, to deliver justice, welfare, and even basic needs to the majority of India's population, should have cast doubts on such a representative democracy?

Over the last few decades, politicians and bureaucrats have made us believe that our one biggest democratic right and function is to faithfully vote every five years (or when the government falls, whichever is earlier). Stand in line, cast the ballot, get an indelible

mark on the finger (aren't we sick of seeing celebrities of various kinds flash this mark, as if this alone is a symbol that all is well with Indian democracy?). Then go home, and let the elected do their job. Crib if they don't, but patiently wait till the next round of balloting comes around in case you want to change the person you chose last time....or that someone else chose.

This form of democracy is a farce. For many reasons. According to a *Times of India* report (June 4, 2009), 145 of the 543 MPs elected this time got less than 20% of the votes from their electorate. On average, MPs got elected by winning just about a quarter of the votes in their constituency. So who are they representing? What should the over 75% of those who did **not** vote for the successful candidate, expect from him/her? Ambrose Bierce's definition of a voter, quoted above, may appear harsh, but it is often not far from the truth.

Okay, leave the 75% aside, what should even the 20-25% (or whatever percentage) who did vote for the successful candidates, expect? Why do they think that these MPs will actually represent their interests, given that they have almost no way of demanding and obtaining accountability? No way of recalling their candidates if they don't act, or act against their interests? No accessible forums in which to participate in decisions being taken by MPs?

This is precisely where drastic changes in our democratic framework are needed. If democracy is to be meaningful to the vast majority of our people, it needs to be **deepened**, made more radical and participatory, or direct. This means that in all or most decisions that are likely to affect my life, I should have the opportunity to take part. Whether I seize this opportunity or not is my choice, but at least I should have it.

Decentralisation in the form of the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, now 15 years old, was supposed to have helped achieve some semblance of participatory democracy. Unfortunately both in conception and even more so in execution, this has remained substantially unfulfilled. Urban wards and gram sabhas or panchayats do indeed have a greater say now than before these amendments came into effect, but for the most part political and financial powers remain concentrated in state or central government institutions. Laws and policies continue to be decided at state and national levels, with little or no public involvement other than the token 'we've put these up on the website, people can comment'. Five-year plans and budgets continue to be made in Delhi or state capitals, and decisions on which international treaties to join or not join are still the prerogative of mandarins sitting in North or South Block. And yet, all of these have a profound impact on the lives of every citizen, who is often not even informed of decisions made, forget about being consulted on them.

The consequences are profound. When a few 'neo-liberal' economists in Delhi decide that the country's interests are best served by a legislation on Special Economic Zones (SEZ), farmers and fishers at hundreds of sites in India do not know what is going to hit them. Even when industrial houses choose specific sites where they wish to establish a SEZ, there is no consultation...The first that local people hear of it is when someone comes around asking to buy their land, or they are issued a notice under the Land Acquisition Act stating that their land is needed for 'public interest'. And if you don't own some land there, if you are a fisherman or adivasi using the common waters or forests (which the government annexed in colonial times), you may not even know that you're ousted until the day you're told you can't fish or collect forest produce there any more. Because India needs to progress...the definition of progress having been decided by an unaccountable government sitting far away from the people.

Decisions with such profound consequences on the lives of hundreds of millions are taken without any form of consultation with such people. Even if they do get to know and voice their opinions, there is no forum to take these voices on board. We joined the World Trade Organisation despite widespread protests by farmers' organisations, trade unions, NGOs, and others, and now the consequences are being faced by those whose livelihoods are destroyed by cheap imports of agricultural and other produce, or whose knowledge is being stolen and privatised in the boardrooms of multinational corporations. Where, in all this, are panchayats and urban wards? What is the meaning of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments if people at the grassroots have no say in such momentous decisions?

This is not only about macro-economic policies, it is also about very specific projects and activities that are imposed on people. When a mining activity is sanctioned by the state and central governments, local people have only one chance to get to know about it and voice their opinions ... at a public hearing organised by a local authority. In most cases documented so far, this has been a farce, with little or no information being made available in local languages to the affected people, and the hearings themselves often being manipulated through the repressive presence of private goons or police clearly aligned towards the project proponent. But even if the public hearing is conducted fairly, there is nothing binding on the government to follow what the people say. And other than this, there is no mandatory avenue for people to be involved in the decision, until they proactively lobby with the government or appeal to a court of law.

Many of us take part in other forms of 'democracy', such as protests, campaigns, judicial action, and so on. All valuable, but mostly of little consequence in the overall scheme of things precisely because **localised** decision-making remains a mirage. Indeed if there was true decentralisation, many of these actions would not be necessary.

In some parts of India, people in small to large numbers boycotted the elections this year, as a mark of protest. In Himachal Pradesh, several thousands around the picturesque Renuka lake stayed away from polling booths, to protest a decision taken in Shimla and Delhi to dam their forests and villages in order to provide water to wasteful consumers in Delhi. Voters of two villages (Janki and Phaguia) of Uttar Pradesh's Gonda district boycotted the elections to protest the lack of development of the area, their demands for basic amenities having been neglected for a decade. In West Midnapore district of West Bengal, tribals led a boycott call protesting the neglect of the region by the state government, and police heavy-handedness (quickly taken advantage of by Maoist groups, leading to an unfortunate stand-off between them and the state government, obscuring the roots of the protest).

True democracy would mean the possibility of each citizen being involved in decisions that directly affect his/her life. Now of course this would not mean a national referendum being held for each decision taken in New Delhi, for this would be impractical for a population the size of India's. There could be a 'hierarchy' of decision-making based not so much on their *locus* (ie whether they are local, state, or national), but on their importance and potential impact on people. Something like whether we should join the WTO or not, or whether foreign investment in the retail sector should be allowed, or what the overall approach in the next five-year plan could be, should require a national referendum -- including a phase of explaining and discussing the implications -- never mind how long it takes. A fundamental policy-level change at the state level should require a state referendum; changes in existing policies or laws or schemes that are not fundamentally altering their character, could do with widespread consultation but not involving a formal referendum. All projects and activities that are at a particular site, such as the siting of an industry or the setting up of a protected area, should go through full consultations and processes of consent from the relevant local community organisations. Projects or activities that are impacting an entire landscape or district or other such unit that is much larger than one or a few local settlements, would require institutional structures that enable widespread public participation, eg river valley authorities that are transparent, open to public inputs, and accountable. Of course at many of these levels there will remain *representative* decision-making, for several thousand or million people cannot take part in all decisions, but such representation will be based on a fully-worked out *participatory* or *direct* process that precedes it.

Direct democracy of this kind sounds extremely cumbersome and unworkable in a country like India. But it need not be. Over time, the forums of participation will be streamlined, people's capacity to engage with them will improve. Laws like the Right to Information Act, and fledgling direct democracy institutions such as gram sabhas and

urban colony associations, are already providing the stepping stones towards this. As they get stronger and more efficient, state and national governments will get clearer signals from decisions being taken at the grassroots, such that many macro-level decisions will get easier to take, and many unpopular or anti-people ones like the SEZ law, will probably never even come to the public for comment.

One must be careful to stress that direct democracy is not the same as a rule by the majority. Many of the guarantees for weaker sections of society, minorities, and so on, will be needed at least for some time till they can overcome the disadvantages of centuries of oppression and disempowerment. Additionally, there will have to be interim provisions for voiceless entities, like nature and the environment, and a broad framework of what is sustainable and equitable human welfare. Over time, hopefully, an enlightened citizenry will imbibe these basic values, such that they form part of every decision taken....leading to what can be called ***radical ecological democracy***. In the absence of such a voting public, in any case the current form of democracy is equally (or even more) unable to protect the rights of the disempowered.

We will make mistakes in the architecture of such a democracy if we try to put everything into place right from the start; we should learn along the way, and give it a few years to make workable. Even in its imperfect state, however, I submit that it would be far more robust than the system we have today.

What we need to supplement the RTI Act with now is a Right to Participate (RTP) Act. The RTA Act (and attendant changes in the Constitution) would enshrine direct democracy as a fundamental right of the people. I should be able to challenge as unconstitutional any decision that is taken which has a direct impact on me, in which I did not get the chance to participate.

**Infochange News & Features, July 2009**