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I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING appointed as Election Observer by the Election Commission of India in Chamoli, Palghat, Satara and Jaipur, to monitor different General Elections. It was a rich experience giving a deep insight into the intricate workings of the electoral process and the myriad problems connected with it. In each Constituency itself hundreds of officials drawn from Central and State government departments from all ranks and cadres, toil day and night, for the smooth conduct of the elections, which is a mammoth exercise, unlike anywhere else in the world!

Elections in India do not mean that the meritorious candidate wins. Very often a host of sociological, political and economic factors compel the electorate to make choices where merit is not given due weightage. This in turn has affected the quality of governance and affected the progress of the country. Whether it is GDP, Health index, global rankings in education or other parameters, India is not placed comfortably. Though we claim to be the world's biggest democracy, trenchant observers will note that, the system has deteriorated, to becoming, a periodic clash between different political ideologies, and citizens being compelled to take sides in a game of ideological warfare. Democracy as conceived and practiced today in India is – by the political party, of the political party and for the political party. The political party is pre-eminent, undermining the importance of the nation itself. 3M's determine the growth and stability of all political parties in India – money power, muscle power and media support. To augment money power, corruption is needed, and to consolidate and perpetuate it, political families are needed. Muscle power and media support, are automatically acquired with growth in financial strength. Amassing incredible wealth is thus the key goal of all political parties. The scams of all kinds that litter the political landscape are a testimony of the insatiable greed for

# Phalanx of Independents



money by political parties. Towards this goal it has been ensured that other pillars of the government are emasculated and made irrelevant. The routine swindling of banks, financial institutions and Temple Hundis are a striking feature of independent India. Savings of the common man are knocked off by cheats posing as business magnates. Looting of Temple Hundis has been institutionalized by political appointees whose sole objective is to siphon off Temple offerings. There is no proper account of funds collected, spent or diverted by these political appointees. Since there is no regular audit and zero transparency, looting becomes a simple task. Imagine the scale of corruption! Political parties try to keep the electorate happy by offering various free schemes. In many States, the people have no need to work, for there are a host of free schemes, catering for requirements from cradle to grave, thereby ruining their careers and personal growth.

Consider the frequent clashes occurring between the Legislature, Executive and

Judiciary. How do we stop this rot? All political parties fight elections to gain brute majority so that they are not answerable to anybody. Three fourths majority is the target that gives them the license to run amok and indulge in wholesale corruption. This greed for unassailable power is often reinforced by unleashing the spectre of violence and sordid brutality as seen in many districts in the country.

Ayn Rand explained why the idea of Democracy is actually evil:

*"Democratic" in its original meaning [refers to] unlimited majority rule... a social system in which one's work, one's property, one's mind, and one's life are at the mercy of any gang that may muster the vote of a majority at any moment for any purpose."*

It is only the electorate that can rein in truant political parties. How can this be achieved? In our electoral system, candidates are thrust by the political parties on a constituency. The people have no say whatsoever as to who they prefer to contest in a constituency. It is a straight fight

between pre determined candidates put up by opposing political entities. Though, there is now a NOTA (None of the above) option, it is not able to control the election trade and foisting of unwanted candidates upon a constituency, and the victory of an undesirable. What could be the solution for this intractable problem?

My considered opinion is that the electorate should encourage meritorious independent candidates. The term 'independent' has good connotations. It conveys images of self-reliance, freedom, and open-mindedness. But, when the word is linked with 'candidate' at election time, the reaction may not be enthusiastic. Many voters view an independent candidate as an anomaly, to be seen as one of the names on the ballot to be ignored, or viewed as a maverick who is making a futile attempt in a party dominated world. But, an Independent Member of Parliament/Legislative Assembly can achieve the best results from the Government for their constituents. Independents are generally able to vote according to their beliefs and the perceived will of their electorate, whereas members who belong to political parties can only follow the party line on every issue. If a substantial number of independents can make it to Panchayats/Corporations/Legislative Assembly and Parliament, it can redefine the political landscape of our country. Non party Parliamentarians and Legislators can have a significant impact on State and Central politics. As the support for the major parties fragment, high profile, locally admired personalities can gain electoral support. There are many distinguished retired civil servants, police officers, decorated officers from the defense forces, professionals from the medical, engineering, and banking sectors, respected teachers and professors from the educational sector, and accomplished artists, who can make a meaningful contribution to change this political landscape. It is heartening to see many young police officers quitting their jobs in Karnataka, and preparing to contest in the ensuing elections. More and more

professionals have to come forward so that the electorate can have a diverse choice. The presence of a large number of educated and knowledgeable candidates, in the electoral fray, can be a trend setter in Indian politics. It is sad to see youngsters keep away from politics. Without a constant influx of youngsters into the electoral arena, the dynamism of the nation cannot be kept alive. Youth participation in politics in Europe and U.S.A. is also very low. This is the reason why voters elect the same parties over and over again, as also the same candidates or their chosen family members. It only indicates that the democratic process is malfunctioning.

Australia has one of the lowest levels of party membership and more independent politicians per capita than any comparable western country. Also, Australia is home to more non-party independent parliamentarians than any other comparable Western country. Ian Marsh states "The habits and practices of two-party politics are deeply ingrained. Those most ambitious for power have the deepest stake in current arrangements. The only hope is for new political forces outside the existing structure of party politics.... The renovation of our present political policy-making system is a potential unintended consequence of the rise of independents."

The longest-serving Independent in any Australian Parliament was Thomas Aikens, who represented the electorate of Townsville South in the Queensland Parliament from 1944 to 1977. Mr Aikens served 12 continuous terms as an Independent Member of Parliament.

This is an extremely opportune time for Independents. In the United Kingdom, Dai Davies, who won Blaenau Gwent byelection for his grouping, the People's Voice, in 2006, states "The party structures have lost the plot," he says. "They don't understand individual constituencies. They think we're all the same. We're not. People feel let down by the Labour party in many ways. They're not listening, and are taking their heartlands for granted. The very areas of this country that built the Labour party have been

abandoned. They've abandoned communities for the big bucks. The banking system is a prime example of it. I take nothing for granted, but I'm hopeful that the community of Blaenau Gwent will realise that the way the party structures are at the moment, there is no chance [for an individual MP] to say 'This is wrong, stop it', because within that party structure you're swallowed up. The whip system has destroyed democracy."

Colin Copus, professor of local politics at De Montfort University and author of Party Politics and Local Government, says that "the election of independent mayors and the number of independent councillors show that the electorate is willing to embrace non-party figures, and believes that it can be an antidote to traditional politics. "Independents offer an approach that doesn't have a great ideological scheme of the world, and is less likely to degenerate into party political point-scoring and yah-boo politics. Parties have their role to play within any form of democracy, and I'm not arguing for party-free government. But parties produce a political discourse that is really about the advancement of party interests, and we need competition from people who think differently and are able to oppose parties. It is argued that political parties make government easy, but I don't want government to be easy. The more independents and other groups engaged in parliament and engaged in local government, the harder it is to govern, and that's good. It results in a more discursive, more engaged, more consensus-oriented type of politics."

Independents planning to contest in the upcoming Karnataka Legislative Assembly Elections 2018 can plan a network of independents across the State to make a coherent statewide challenge to the established parties. Politics in India is today an elite sport, only a diverse crowd of independents can help in the much-needed renewal of simple public life. ■

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