

Vote is not donation, it is right

India has gone to the polls to elect the 16th Lok Sabha with over 800 million voters making this the largest democratic election in history! In an atmosphere drenched in corruption and high inflation where political ideologies have been blurred to extinction and issues are hazy if at all, people, especially the youth who are 20% of the electorate, are disillusioned and apathetic.

Things have fallen apart. Common sense has failed us, political and economic theories have failed us, the new world information technology has failed us, policies have failed us, peacekeeping has failed us, our military is ill-equipped and in a shambles, our leaders in government, media, and the intelligentsia. . . even our convictions seems to have failed us. But most of all we have failed! We as citizens – the custodians of democracy – we who hold this precious yet fragile concept in our hands – we who gave unto ourselves a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic to secure for ourselves Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity have disengaged from active participation in governance and abdicated our right to dissent - the fundamental right to hold our elected representatives accountable and the right to protest and oppose wrong doing.

Now the discussion is around the criminal record and financial assets of candidate's and not their ability to represent us in the highest law making body of our nation. It is not the capacity or expertise of the individuals to debate in parliament - but their muscle power. It is not their integrity to be answerable to their constituency or uphold the constitution - but their ability to manoeuvre a position of influence and power.

One is left with a Hobson's choice – choosing the least of the offenders or opting for NOTA [none of the above] that unfortunately only counts as an invalid vote and not a rejection as many assume.

If our system of governance has degenerated to this – we are to blame for our apathy and abstinence. It is a chicken and the egg question. Our apathy degrades democracy by allowing the growth of corruption virus resulting bad governance and this in turn triggers disillusionment and apathy among us. We are taught to be suspicious of everything – the germs in our environment, our neighbours, even the air we breathe and the food we eat and this is not propagated by our parents who were our moral teachers, but the power of the television.

Amidst all this I was watching the video of 97 year old Shyam Saran Negi India's first voter and a believer in democracy since 1951. A man who has never failed to vote in an election; a retired teacher school teacher who still understands his role in the survival and protection of Indian Democracy; a man with more wrinkles than his years who walks 2 kilometres in heavy snow to cast his vote with pride and joy and a sparkle in his wise eyes; Masterji, as he is affectionately called, who experienced the birth pangs of our nation and the pain of partition and is now confronted with all the complex and distressing issues of today, still believes that there is hope and it is not too late to change and will cast his vote on 7th May for “a party which will sincerely attempt to change the country and provide a good government.”

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But Negi appears to be an exception. The apathy has set in so deep that our biggest problem is how to get citizens to vote, especially the urban middle class and the youth. All kinds of inducements are being offered by candidates that the Central Election Commission has fortunately come down hard and appears to be extra vigilant this time around. However, inducements such as discounts for theatre tickets free soft drinks and discount vouchers for restaurant meals and clothing stores are being offered by election officers in Haryana and Punjab and Jharkhand, violating their own election code! While Negi refuses even transport to his polling booth.

Our role begins with the vote but certainly does not end there. Keeping our elected representatives on their toes is crucial and accountable. We hand over our precious right to a representative and it is her/his duty obligation to honour that sacred pledge and represent the constituency faithfully. In this context NOTA should have the power of rejection if it receives the largest number of votes and result in the setting aside of the election for a re-election. If NOTA had the power to reject, more of us citizens may be inspired to cast our vote. However, this is just one step in a long line of electoral reforms that we need including the right to recall.

Therefore, casting our vote in this election is just a beginning towards a long and patient healing of our nation, a step by step realignment of the building blocks of governance and the resurgence of the principles of participatory democracy.

India needs us to rescue her from disaster and we the people need to save her to save ourselves.

Nandana Reddy

Nandana Reddy is the Convenor of the 'Grama Panchayat Hakkottaya Andolana', Since, 2010 the Gram Panchayat Hakkottaya Andolana (GPHA; The Movement for Self-determination of Gram Panchayats) has been fighting the illegal and immoral promotion of the 'vote' as a commodity that can be bought or sold by parties and candidates during elections. The 'Me & My VOTE are NOT for SALE' campaign has been actively campaigning against this and promoting the need for citizens to value their 'vote' and use it conscientiously. It has, within the month, hosted events in 14 districts of Karnataka reaching out to 7000 people directly and 35000 indirectly with the support of partner organisations such as Mahila Samakhya. In Bangalore, cycle rallies, a bike rally and a padhyatra along with a public 'Celebration of the VOTE' at Town Hall – have been held. In Andhra Prades, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, organisations like APSA and MRWS have undertaken the campaign slogan and generated awareness and opened conversations. Its digital and media advocacy have also had extensive national coverage including receiving endorsement on Satyameva Jayate programme.