

India got its freedom through a long struggle. With this freedom, India achieved Universal Suffrage, which means that every citizen above the age of 18 is allowed to vote. The vision of our freedom fighters thus got embarked in the right to vote. Voting is the agent of change and is a Constitutional right of citizens over 18 years of age in India. It offers every citizen a medium of expression and the process of voting allows every citizen to have a say in what should constitute the matters of importance by voting for the candidate he or she deems fit for the purpose. Though the outcome of elections is hardly ever predictable; yet if citizens don't cast their vote then they are giving up on the chance of getting heard.

In a populous democracy like India, a voter might think that a vote doesn't matter but when this thought prevails over the nation; then citizens might miss out from helping the best candidate win the election. Both as a right and responsibility, voting lays the foundation of the Indian democracy. Citizens need to be careful about their power of casting a vote in order to strengthen the existence of the democratic Republic.

Voting is a sort of honour granted to the citizens by the founding fathers of the Constitution of India. Citizens demonstrate their respect for the history of the country through exercising their right to vote. By not casting their vote, the citizens in a way improve the chances of the unsuitable ones winning the polls. And as a whole, the voter has to suffer through poor governance at the end.

Being the most essential element of the electoral system, the right to vote is universal and equal and gives to the citizens the freedom to choose among various candidates or political parties in elections. As every vote counts, so the responsibility lies on every individual to vote responsibly. The voters in India have also been offered the provision to exercise their vote even if they aren't happy with any of the candidates. Known as NOTA- 'None of the Above' is an important vote to cast for those who aren't satisfied by any of the standing parties.

Electoral Malpractices

As the signpost of democracy, elections at regular intervals make the most significant features of a democratic polity. These act as a medium of reflection of the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people towards their political environment. Acting as the central democratic procedure for selecting and controlling leaders, elections also symbolize the sovereignty of the people and provide legitimacy to the authority of the government.

But the electoral system in India has been restricted by many obstacles and dampening factors, that encourage the anti-social elements to jump into the electoral battle.

Electoral malpractice, also known as electoral fraud, electoral manipulation or electoral rigging is the interference with the process of election in an illegal manner. It can be done either by increasing the share of the vote of the favoured candidate or by depressing the share of the vote of the rival candidate.

Electoral malpractice can be in the form of use of money power or muscle power or even manipulation through media. Right from the distribution of tickets by the political parties, the use of money power begins. Those candidates who can contribute maximum money to the party corpus and have fat bank balance to purchase votes, are given importance and this way the personal qualities of the prospective candidates get ignored by most political parties.

Clubs and organizations are given handsome donations and crowds are rented for party meetings, mad shows, rallies and campaigns. Public morality thus gets ignored this way by political parties in their struggle to capture power.

One of the biggest challenges in elections remains the use of muscle power that dictates the selection of candidates and party, forcing people against voting freely. Widespread use of muscle power can be seen in the form of heavy monetary demands to candidates, imposing ban on filing nominations, ban on election campaigns and even forcing people whom to vote for or not to vote.

Besides these, the deteriorating law and order is often capitalized by many candidates to their advantage to win elections. The free employment of muscle power has erupted election related violence at several places during the polls. Political ethics have been forgotten by most of the political parties who openly take support from banned armed groups.

Media has also contributed to the electoral malpractices in spite of playing a neutral role in a democratic society. Whereas in a democratic election, the media reporting and publication of political views including the projection of party and candidates' images impact the voting pattern directly, media plays a crucial role in the same. Favoritism and misquoting have become the recent trend of the media. Media persons are often found indulged in publication of misleading news and views.

Other malpractices include freebies, booth capturing, proxy voting, unfair means of election conducting, hate speeches against the contesting parties and vote bank politics to name a few.

Electoral Reforms

The Election Commission has expressed its concern and anxiety many a time for removing obstacles in the way of free and fair polls. A number of recommendations have thus been made and the government has been repeatedly reminded about the necessity of

changing the existing laws so that the electoral malpractices are checked.

Electoral reforms include following aspects:

- Freeing the election process from muscle and money power
- Transparency about the background of the candidates
- Prohibiting the nexus between business and politics
- Upholding the secrecy of voters
- Fair registration and recognition of the political parties without any kind of influence
- Solution of delisting of illiterate voters
- Non-partisan role of media
- Applying model code of conduct efficiently
- Expediting and rationalizing the electoral processes

India already has laws to check electoral malpractices in the form of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, Election Code of Conduct and so on.

Political party funding reform has been enacted through various changes to the Company Laws, through Money Bills, the Income Tax Laws, through Supreme Court orders and so on.

Anti-Defection Law

Passed in 1985, through the 52nd Amendment to the Constitution, this law intends to combat the evil of political defections by elected politicians for the lure of office.

SC in 2002 has directed all contesting candidates to furnish all personal information, including the criminal record at the time of filing nomination papers.

State funding of political parties by means of a National Electoral Fund or on the basis of the number of votes obtained is a valid proposal. Capping the expenditure of political parties and giving the Election Commission of India the powers to deregister unruly political parties are few of the proposed reforms. Revisiting the Information Technology Act is also another requisite for strengthening the social media regulations and inclusion of the proportional representation system along with depoliticization of constitutional appointments by appointing of the Commissioners through a broad-based collegium makes sense.