

OPINION

A lot to say, but little to offer

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The current nationalist hysteria does not enable the voter to make her choice in tranquility

Elections are an opportunity for people to express their will. In healthy situations, electioneering is undertaken with sensitivity to a people's welfare. When public life becomes pathological, electioneering becomes indifferent to lived realities. People allow themselves to be bewitched by rhetorical demagoguery. Instead of choosing what is good for them, people punish persons and parties they are made to dislike.

The will of a people is that their real-life needs must be addressed. It is that governance should become a medium through which welfare is enhanced. If this is the case, electioneering will focus on the issues that concern the people. Good governance is its by-

product. Governance stands rooted in freedom and justice for all. Good governance is not a matter of growth-related statistics or muscle flexing against political rivals.

The essence of freedom in a democracy is that citizens are able to exercise their right to choose in an informed fashion. It is to this end that electioneering and exercising one's franchise need to be 'free and fair'. Political parties which try to vitiate electioneering with extraneous factors so as to determine how citizens exercise their franchise can have no interest in providing good governance. That they feel obliged to resort to such strategies is tantamount to a confession that they have failed in providing good governance.

Nationalistic hysteria

Consider, for example, the promise of development that dominated electioneering in 2014 (*'achhe din'*). But this promise does not figure at all in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's electioneering this time. Instead, he is busy whipping up 'national security' hysteria. The need to tom-tom 'national security' arises only because of an aggravation of insecurity. Admittedly, national security has deteriorated under Mr. Modi's watch, through terrorism and cross-border hostilities.

The strange thing is that this distressing sign of the failure of governance is being used to whip up nationalistic hysteria to prevent factual and rational thinking. This undermines the capacity of citizens to make rational choices conducive to their welfare. The purpose of jingoistic propaganda is to ensure that people do not express their will through franchise, but vote according to the will of somebody else. No election conducted amid mass hysteria can be 'free or fair'. The Election Commission is in denial of realities, even if it maintains otherwise. The prescription that electioneering shall stop 48 hours before voting takes place is meant to provide voters the serenity to think for themselves in a calm and collected fashion. But thinking does not take place in a vacuum; it is substantially influenced by what a person has been exposed to in the immediate past. It is naïve to assume that the potent effect of jingoistic propaganda will wear off in two days. Propaganda of this kind affords the party in power a huge advantage over its rivals. All the more so given the support it enjoys of a partisan media, augmented by an army of social media warriors who enjoy freedom to distort information.

Even this would not have proved so lethal, but for the disarray among the Opposition parties, which seem to not know who to fight. Much of the impact of Mr. Modi's speeches stems from the Opposition's immaturity and irresponsibility. As of now, these parties seem to lack vision and consistency. When a voter, as yet unsettled by pro-Modi propaganda, weighs her options before deciding who to vote for, she is likely to wonder if there is a viable alternative to endorse.

An irresponsible campaign

Elections must be fought on real-life issues. To fight is to stay focused. The outcome of staying focused is that the public are educated on the ground realities vis-à-vis the issues that concern them. Only within such a framework can alternatives be identified.

Instead, the energy in the present electioneering has gone into generating waves of mutual acrimony. The alleged inferiority of Opposition parties does not alleviate the deprivations of the people. The sole point on which the present electioneering is strategised is that people have no alternative other than oneself. Parties vie with each other in proving that all are vile and unworthy. Neither formation offers anything convincingly positive to decide rationally which way to turn.

But this one thing I know: the Modi show is based on violence and malevolence – linguistic, sentimental, ideological and communal. His idea of patriotism is no more than hostility towards Pakistan. But time will prove that reducing the outcome of the world's largest democratic franchise to settling scores with a neighbouring country, in utter indifference to pan-Indian lived realities, is at once idiotic and irresponsible.

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