

Spark of hope in parliamentary democracy

The countdown has begun. For the stakeholders in the Assembly elections, it is nothing but a number game with calculation after calculation. It is of course a different matter that if the claims made by the major players like the Congress and the BJP are taken into account, the number exceeds the "actual" number of members of the Assam Assembly. It is true that in certain schools of thought, numbers are irrelevant; what matters is "quality".

In Nazi Germany, numbers were redundant. It was a question of "all". Hitler wanted to garner support of the entire German nation. In Indian philosophy, namely *Sarvodaya*, the emphasis has been on *sarva*, meaning "all", with the

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focus on "welfare of all". But within the structure of parliamentary democracy, the focus is obviously on numbers. Although the spirit of parliamentary democracy was certainly not to make it a power game, it has definitely turned out to be so and the contemporary trend in politics in countries having parliamentary form of government is a true indication of it.

Ethics apart, it is a sheer number game. In all likelihood, the same would be the situation in Assam as well. The parties in the fray appear to be desperate. It seems that prior to the declaration of the election results, they have manufactured these in their favour and outmanoeuvred their opponents in the figments of their imagination. Well before D-Day, the parties have pre-formed their governments with utter disregard to the fact that the actual results are yet to be announced. Is it

not a kind of denigration of the popular wisdom that has remained captive in the ballot box?

It is quite interesting to see that in democracies, despite huge differences in terms of income, social status, caste affiliations, available livelihood opportunities and others, almost everyone is in the grip of one common issue — election. In the evening *addas*, office gossip, university seminars, evening and nightclubs, the topic of debate and discussions are centred on elections alone.

The other day, I met the *paanwalla* in my locality at Ambari, Guwahati, who was caught up in his discussion on the prospects of the parties with his customers, who crowd his tiny shop from evening to late night.

He spoke eloquently in favour of the saffron party and predicted that the BJP would form the government with a

clear majority. While selling a few more *paans* to the group deeply engrossed in the *adda*, he spoke of the disaster he saw for the Congress within the next two days.

In fact, he was very angry with the Congress party for the poor condition of the main



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road on which his shop was located.

Having overheard this conversation, I just remembered a story in a local newspaper that Assam's performance was excellent in terms of road conditions and connectivity. While the policy planners at the top were highly satisfied with the news item, the periphery had

a different take on reality. Thus, calculations are not at all easy. Even the most experienced mathematical genius may fail to read the minds of the masses.

On another occasion, I remember talking to a farmer in a paddy field near Bongaigaon. Having started his preliminary activities for his crops, the farmer was worried that too much of pre-monsoon rains could easily ruin his harvest. He was of the frank opinion that had there been a mechanism to harvest this rainwater, which would enable farmers to use it at the time of requirement, agriculture would have been a different experience altogether.

To add to his woes, he had hardly found a good customer for his crop for reasons that were unknown to him. To his belief he had produced the best of the organic crop and yet had failed to secure a good support price for his hard

work. It was almost as though agriculture had gradually turned into a liability for him. When I asked him as to what was the response of the government to his problems, he had sharply replied, "Who is government? Where is the government?"

Apathy towards the common people apart, the system continues. There is so much of voting in both the phases of the elections that I wonder at their reasons for voting. Is there still a hope at the periphery? It has been stated that the voting percentage has even surpassed that of 1985 when the AGP came to power defeating the Congress.

Knowing fully well that the change of guard has practically no meaning to the "grassroots", is it that somewhere at some point the people are still optimistic about the democratic system? That I think is the 'silver lining' of the entire democratic exercise manifest-

ed in the form of elections. These are all suggestive of the fact that the parliamentary system still generates hopes in the periphery.

Whether it is *parivartan* (change) or *pratyavartan* (return), could there be a spark for an alternative? Or could the parliamentary system be adequate enough to go for an alternative in the real sense of the term? I am frequently asked these questions by college teachers who are eager to receive an answer to tell their students the actual plight of the democratic system in India.

At some point of time, I almost turn speechless wondering how the common people's aspirations could be meaningfully linked to that of democracy. When CPM cadres become Bengal's Mamata Banerjee's foot soldiers overnight, is it the best *parivartan* we can think of in a parliamentary system?