

Paying for votes

Corruption hampers good governance

by N. Bhaskara Rao

FOUR issues relating to our electoral practices need to be addressed urgently. The national election time is the right time to ponder over these. These are campaign expenditure, the extent money is paid to influence voters, the way the news media covers the polls and representative character of our elected MPs, MLAs and governments.

A new wave of democracy in the country can be ushered in only by addressing these issues. They have implications to the kind of democracy we have.

Despite some initiatives of the Election Commission, poll-eve campaign expenditure is skyrocketing election after election. Unless we understand the linkage of this phenomenon with the larger malice that this expenditure implies to good governance and the very democratic system, we will be talking more about symptoms.

Consider, for example, the CMS's latest in the series of studies on corruption involved in citizens availing basic government services and the extent political parties pay cash to voters.

The countrywide studies in 2007 and 2008 bring out that the phenomenon of "paying for votes" is not limited to a few or here and there, but includes the young and the old the educated and the illiterate, and rural and urban.

In some states, more than one-third of voters have been paid for their votes on poll-eve in the last 10 years. These figures have been validated with sub-sample surveys since.

What does this mean? I call this the "mother of all corruption" as this practice sets or perpetuates corruption in governance: This trend is expected to increase further in 2009 as it has become a "necessary

condition" to give a fight in the election.

That being the case, can we strengthen our democracy without addressing this phenomenon? Means no longer matter in our electoral process, winning at any cost does. That cannot be the core of competitive politics.

The citizen is not realising that by "accepting" money for vote once in five years or so, he/she is falling into a vicious trap of having to pay as bribe several times more and every year for availing basic public services that they are entitled to otherwise. Hence the urgency to understand the seriousness of the

condition, the total expenditure should not be more than Rs 3,500 crore (even assuming 4-5 candidates seriously contest on an average per constituency).

We have lessons from the US experience of how huge amounts are raised for poll campaigns — most of it for "TV advertising". For, with increased reliance on news media as a major source of poll campaign, the expenditure is bound to increase significantly.

A prominent political analyst who worked with Gallop Agency in the US for long has concluded in his book recently

could be said as short-circuiting the very electoral process.

This linkage needs to be understood better and corrected wherever required and in whatever manner. The best bet for democracy is concerned and competent citizens, not "competitive politics" or more of the same punditary of news media.

We have today in India more "24-hour news channels" than in any other country and their number is likely to mount further in 2009. As the one who pioneered pre-poll surveys and exit polls for the news media three decades ago, I am not questioning the media's freedom.

But one needs to question the methodology and transparency aspects of such studies and the way they are covered and presented by channels to a large section of voters as if that is the way "it is" and as if preempting the very value of vote.

Such coverage instead should motivate voting, help voters discriminate candidates on their virtues. And, more importantly, the coverage should reflect needs and aspirations of communities rather than greed and glamour of political "dadas". The punditary aspects in the coverage of a campaign should give way to participatory opportunity of citizens.

The representative character of Lok Sabha members and that of the parties in power in the states has not been increasing. In fact, it is on the decline. Not even half of the Lok Sabha members today win with 50 per cent of the polled votes, which means representing hardly 30 per cent of the electorate of the constituency, or even less, depending on the turnout. The onus to debate these issues rests on parties and voter associations and civil society groups. And, of course, on the news media of the country.

India Votes

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phenomenon of paying for votes.

The voter turnout has not been increasing despite more educated voters, the mounting campaign expenditure and proliferation of news channels and their coverage of the electoral process. The Election Commission spends about Rs 100 crore to educate voters and another Rs 1,000 crore on conducting the polls.

Parties and candidates spend ten times that, about Rs 10,000 crore, for one round of the Lok Sabha polls. Most of this money spent by candidates and even parties is not officially declared. Going by what is allowed today as election expenditure by

that "democracy is endangered by the way the news media uses public opinion polls" on the eve of elections.

All this, however, should not mean that TV is bad or it should not cover the electoral process. All that I am saying is that implications are not positive. Perhaps because the "kind of coverage" that channels are doing requires a relook — in terms of their format, structure, participation and the extent of repeat and "more of the same" kind of coverage TV channels are engaged in.

Certain "righteousness" that is indicated by these programmes — despite TV punditary going wrong more often, is what