

Three Cheers to Indian Democracy

George Mathew

When the *Times of India*, one of India's leading national dailies began its special election coverage under the title 'dance of democracy', there were skeptics who argued that the 2009 elections would lead us nowhere, and that these will result in instability, chaos and waste of time and resources. Today, those skeptics and prophets of doom have been proved wrong. This election has proved to be a landmark one.

The free media and the free speech have made Indian elections the most hotly debated, intellectually stimulating and trend-setting. The heat thus generated contributed immensely to the free and fair elections.

India has made the best use of the electronic voting system and information technology. For this election, 11 million electronic voting machines were used. On the day the votes were being counted, there were so many hits on the Election Commission site that its server collapsed! The code of election conduct imposed by the Election Commission was respected by one and all and the elections were free and fair. A new 'political culture of elections' has come to stay in the country. The largest democracy in the world, with an electorate of 714 million and a complex society, has shown that it has not only an efficient election system in place (without any complaints against the Election Commission which is a quasi-judicial body) but also a mature electorate.

Nearly 60 per cent of the electorate voted for a stable government for the next five years, even though it is a coalition led by the Congress Party. This election has proved that the ordinary people want freedom, peace and development. Poor people are concerned about their livelihood. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's (2004 – 2009) thrust on rural development through innovative programmes like creating a separate ministry for rural local government, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and fighting for transparency through Right to Information Act (RTI) etc. have immensely contributed to the victory of the governing coalition. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has made it clear in his first statement after getting elected that "growth will be our main focus. And when I mean growth, I mean inclusive growth that will carry everyone along, including the underprivileged in the country".

The defeat of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led coalition has sent the message that people of India support a secular set up. The religion based politics or communalism has few takers. That has been doubly proved by the victory of Biju Janata Dal (BJD) party in the state of Orissa. The BJD parted company with the BJP which had earlier instigated sectarian violence against Christians in one of the tribal districts and got a thumping majority in the Assembly and Parliament.

What about the election of people with criminal antecedents and the use of money power? Of course both elements have found substantial representation in the present Lok Sabha - the lower house. In the present Lok Sabha, there are 150 tainted Members and 300 millionaires; in the previous Lok Sabha the respective numbers were 128 and 154. But there is a difference. Money power and muscle power are not the sufficient condition to get elected. Many millionaires and mafia leaders have lost. Several convicted Members of Parliament (MPs) in the previous Lok Sabha fielded their wives but all of them lost. This is a welcome trend and the enlightened electorate can eventually show the door to these anti social elements as well.

It may also be noted that the present Lok Sabha has more women MPs than ever-10.7 % while the previous percentage was only 8.7. Another notable feature is that there are 81 MPs this time who are below 40 years. In India politicians cannot always create a fiefdom or vote bank through patronage while they are in Parliament. This is clear from the fact that only 33% of the sitting MPs got elected this time; 67 % are new faces. A sign of India moving towards a society recognizing the rights of the poor and downtrodden is the fact that today there are 84 Lok Sabha seats reserved for Scheduled Castes(former untouchables) and 47 for the Scheduled Tribes (indigenous people). Moreover the Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament which is the highest post in the country after the President and the Prime Minister, is a woman from Scheduled Caste.

The coalition politics in India is here to stay. In this election, for the 543 Lok Sabha seats, 369 political parties had put up 8,070 candidates . But only 36 parties have succeeded in sending one or more MPs to the Lok Sabha and 17 parties are part of the present coalition, including outside support. Sincere and people oriented leaders are coming to the centrestage, peace and development have become the war cries (eg. Kashmir). Secular society is what people want. Slowly we are recognizing the importance of women in political leadership. Young people are coming forward to work and participate in the elections. The voters support men of integrity like the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. These are some of the messages this election has sent to the rest of the world.

(The writer is Director, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi)