

WHY VOTE FOR VIOLENCE?

A Decisive Action May Come Through the Legal Route

Do criminals abuse politics or is it politics which thrives on criminals? Is there a symbiotic relationship between the two? Can we free elections from excessive use of money or muscle power? Can India afford to have one in five MPs facing serious criminal charges? Why can't we ban all criminals from fighting elections?

The future of Indian democracy hinges on some of these questions. And for answers, we turn to our leaders, political parties, elected representatives or experts. As citizens it is our right to ask questions or demand action from our politicians and parliamentarians. However, we, as voters, never ask ourselves the simplest of all questions: Why do we elect criminals?

The answer, obviously, is more complicated than we think. In real life, candidates with serious criminal charges are not just allowed to contest but they are twice as likely to win, when compared to cleaner candidates. Also, we elect thugs and criminals consciously and with full knowledge about them. We do so even when better choices are available. We also know that if the voters stop electing criminals, the parties would stop fielding them.

So, if the bulk of voters have only themselves to blame, should the rest of us close our eyes and do nothing? Or should we give in to cynical retorts like, "Nothing can be done in this country and so on..." or even worse, "Only a benevolent dictator can clean the system etc." However, such remedies turn out to be worse than the diseases they hope to cure because cynicism kills all hope and dictatorship is a recipe for disaster. The need, therefore, is to first diagnose the problem objectively before finding systemic and long term solutions rather than quick fixes.

First of all, we as citizens, must applaud our achievements in holding relatively free and fair elections for decades in a country as large, as diverse and fragmented as India. It is not a small thing that our elections are largely peaceful and the transfer of power is always smooth. We have left behind the days of booth capturing and stuffing of ballot boxes. It was common in the sixties and seventies for the people of the vulnerable communities to be driven away from polling booths or to be told that their votes had been cast. Today, a wholesale hijack is almost impossible and the people of the weaker sections tend to turn up in larger numbers in successive elections. It is in this overall context that we need to see, and resolve, the relatively recent problem of criminalisation of politics.

One of the reasons for the rise of criminals is the advent of a narrow identity politics in the past few decades. People are rediscovering or consolidating their narrow identities because of a suspicion that the louder voices are the only ones getting heard and the smaller caste and community groups and the marginalised are being ignored. So, every community is learning to prop up its own version of a strong leader or an identity-based party. Such is the state of suspicion of the other — and the recoil into one's own identity — that the crimes of 'our own people' appear to be lesser offences than those of others and therefore, voting for them looks like a reasonable thing to do.

Tainted slumlords are also hot favourites because of their capacity to provide protection and entitlements to voters. For poor slum dwellers, often treated by the police as aliens and encroachers, voting for Mr Nice Guy may appear to be a waste of vote. In a study of Delhi slums, Sanjay Kumar (2016) of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies shows how the urban poor negotiate political clout using a network of

patron-client ties through a broker who happens to be an influential person or a community leader. And for this reason, scholars like Kanchan Chandra, a well-known political scientist at the New York University have referred to Indian democracy as a “patronage democracy.”

Another big reason for criminalisation is a disproportionate rise in the intensity of competitive politics in India. When we juxtapose such perceived discrimination to India’s competitive politics, we begin to see the justification for inter-ethnic, inter-religious or inter-caste polarisation. Many parties, their fringe organisations and followers, work hard to first drive the wedge deeper and then to win over the fragmented groups. Factors like the agrarian crises, lack of jobs and economic stagnation further complicate matters. Even the upper caste Brahmins and Rajputs, and other dominant castes like the Jats, Patels etc, believe that the ‘others’ are being appeased at their expense. In his seminal book, *Votes and Violence*, Steven I Wilkinson (2004) cites several examples from around the world to show that there is a relationship between ethnic violence and political competition.

We are obviously not so concerned about ‘crimes’ registered during campaigns, agitations, dharnas or processions or while courting arrest against government policies etc. Serious crimes imply offences like armed dacoity, abduction, rape or murder, serious fraud etc. which attract a prison term of more than two years. The politicians argue that no one should be punished or presumed guilty unless convicted or else it would be a violation of the candidate’s fundamental rights.

It has been suggested that a candidate should be barred from contesting elections if charges of a serious nature have been framed against him by a court of law. A distinction has to be made between bona fide political protests and rioting, arson or hate crimes. There can even be a court-appointed screening committee in every state to work under the supervision of the Election Commission to certify that the charges against the candidate are criminal or political in nature. However, as a leading democracy, we need to be worried about the spurt in hate crimes, communal riots or vigilante violence, which is vitiating India’s body politic and creating a new cadre of lumpen politicians.

An antidote to the poison of identity and competitive politics is inclusive governance where the parties try to meet the aspirations of all sections of people without fear or favour. People can bear scarcity, even deprivation, but they revile favouritism, especially when shown to others. Rights-based citizenship and delivery of services can spur a healthy competition of its own. But for that our political parties need to stop feeding prejudices and blaming one section of people for the problems of the other. Just as there are electoral incentives in spreading politically motivated crimes there can be equal incentive in stopping them. However, a decisive action against criminalisation and hate mongering will most likely come through the legal route because the politicians would always put a candidate’s winnability before his antecedents. We, as citizens, must keep the faith in democracy and its institutions and treat electoral reforms not as an event but as a continuous process.

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