

# WANTED ELECTIONS AS IF PEOPLE MATTERED

## - Suggestions for Radical Reforms into the present election system

Nobody can fight a Parliament election without spending lakhs and lakhs of rupees. Further, being directly elected, they consider themselves to be above the state assemblies. This is not compatible with the federal concept, where lower levels of government should have more sovereignty.

Unfortunately, at present, there is neither democracy nor federalism. Individual citizens have very little to say about the election process except to vote one or the other candidate into power. They do not have even the right to recall. Elections have become so costly a process that only those who can raise large finances can contest elections. Unless we bring in radical reforms in the election process and the structure of governments, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments will amount in infraction.

### Panchayats, not the smallest

In the five-tier system of government, the most basic one is the Panchayat. It is not, of course, the smallest socio-cultural unit of the society, which could be the village, the *desom*, the hamlet, the *mohulla*, the *tola* and the like. But these are too small and incomplete for becoming effective units of local self-governments. The panchayat is a collection of a few villages or at least one village if it is too big.

The size of the panchayats varies considerably. An average Indian panchayat will have a population of 4000-5000. In the State of Kerala, it is 25000-30000 and in some cases even more than 50000. Many such panchayats can be split into smaller units. If we take India as a whole, majority of the panchayats will come in the range of 4000-10000.

### Other four

The block/mandal, the district, state and centre-these are the other four stages. Direct elections take place to all the representative bodies. On an average, about 200-2000 citizens elect block council member, about 20000 to 50000 persons elect one district council member, about 2-3 lakh citizens elect one MLA and about 15 lakh persons elect one MP.

Obviously voters do not have any direct knowledge of the candidate, except in the first tier. Election expenses are enormous, running into several million rupees in the case of parliament elections. Lakhs of rupees for even district council elections.

Recall is out of question because there is absolutely no mechanism for this. We are proposing a new representative system which makes recall easy and election process almost costless.

## **Neighbourhoods: basic constituencies**

Each ward/habitat/mohulla/tola can be divided into groups of neighbourhoods consisting of 50 to 80 houses (100 to 200 voters). These voters are persons who know each other thoroughly. This neighbourhood forms the “basic constituency”. A general council of all the voters (above the age of 18) from among these households will elect from among themselves a woman and a man to represent them in the panchayat general council (panchayat parliament). This election can be done in a common meeting of these voters, either through open ballot or through secret ballot.

## **Wards**

An average Indian Panchayat (of 5000 population) may have 10-15 such example, can have up to 100 or more such neighbourhoods.

From amongst the neighbourhood representatives within each “ward” one woman and one man can be elected as ward representatives. All the ward members together form the panchayat committee which from among themselves shall elect the president (sarpanch), vice president and other office-bearers.

It is incumbent on the ward members to discuss the essence of what transpires within the panchayat committee with the neighbourhood representatives so that the functioning of the panchayat is fully transparent. It will also help the people to creatively participate in running the affairs of the society.

If more than fifty percent of the voters within a neighbourhood so decides they can recall their representatives. Similarly the neighbourhood representatives within a ward can recall their ward member, if more than fifty percent of them so decide. The president/sarpanch can be removed on only with the concurrence of more than fifty percent of the members of the panchayat of the general council.

## **Integrate revenue and development**

What should be the form of the middle level government between the panchayat and the district? There is no uniformity of opinion about this. Should it be the C.D. block? Should it be the tehsil? There is, at present, a dichotomy between the revenue-side and the development-side. This has to be addressed too. The two have to be merged. Again sizes and forms will not be and cannot be the same in all the states. One may think of an integrated unit: the revenue, the development and the political responsibilities clubbed together. The legislative assembly constituency with about 2 lakh population may be taken as the intermediate level of government, instead of either the block or the tehsil.

All the three, the block, the tehsil and the assembly constituency can be rolled into one. It should have a whole number of panchayats and re-defined, based on agro-climatic and development consideration. Of course, in case of very small districts, this intermediary level can be dispensed with. The larger cities can retain their current structure. One woman and one man can represent about 10000 persons in these block level assemblies.

The total number of members could be between 40 and 60.

Instead of direct elections, they can be elected by the neighbourhood representatives. This will be better on two accounts: (I) elections will be cheaper and recall will be easier, (ii), the block councils will not become a higher level of government.

Each panchayat shall elect one woman and one man as its representatives to the block assembly for every group of 100 neighbourhood representatives. Each panchayat will have at least one such pair of representatives. Larger panchayats will have more number of pairs. The block assembly representatives will be elected not from among the neighbourhood representatives, but from among the citizens of the panchayat. Nobody should be a member of more than one representative body.

### **Desirable districts**

The next stage of the government is the district. The desirable population-range for a district could be from 10 lakhs to a maximum of 30 lakhs. In the district council, we can think of two representatives – one woman and one man – for every one lakh population, subject to a minimum of, say, 30, meaning, thereby that the ratio could be reduced to smaller districts. There will be, on an average, about 20 panchayats per district constituency. The neighbourhood representatives from these panchayats – about 500 to 1000 in all – shall elect from among the citizens of the constituency one woman and one man to the district council.

### **State assemblies**

The fourth level is the State Assembly. The re-organized block and the state assembly constituency are one and the same.

Each one of them will have about 1000-2000 neighbourhood representatives in all. They are to elect, not from among themselves, but from among the citizens of the constituency, one woman and one man to the state assembly.

### **At the centre**

Now, we come to the fifth level – the Central Government. Today, we have a Parliament and a Rajya Sabha. Direct election from among 10-12 lakh people. Actually reflects not the people's will, but the money power of the candidate.

Nobody can fight a Parliament election without spending lakhs and lakhs of rupees. Further, being directly elected, they consider themselves to be above the state assemblies. This is not compatible with the federal concept, where lower levels of government should have more sovereignty. The higher levels will have only those powers which are given to them by the lower governments. So, we propose that instead of the Parliaments. So, we propose that instead of the Parliament we shall have only the Rajya Sabha which will transact the business of the Parliament, too. The state assemblies can elect the members to this Rajya Sabha. The number of members which each state can send can be limited to the ratio of one woman and one man for every 30 lakh population.

## Recall

At every level elected representatives remain subject to recall if more than fifty per cent of those who elected them so desire.

## Advantages

The advantages of the above system of representation are:

- i. it protects the sovereignty of the citizen at all levels.
- ii. It makes recall easily realizable and this makes democracy more real.
- iii. It makes the election process almost costless. Neither the neighbourhood meetings nor the subsequent elections demand large sums of money.
- iv. One can conduct elections either openly or by secret ballot.
- v. At all levels women get equal representation. No complicated reservation formula is required.

## Women and the schedules

However, we may have to insist that at the panchayat, block and district levels, one of the two senior most office-bearers should be a woman. Similarly, reservation will have to be made in a suitable manner to ensure that SC and ST do get proper representation.

*(From a paper presented by the author in the Sixth All India People's Conference held in Hyderabad in 1994. Its original title: "Panchayat Raj and Federal structure).*

*(Dr. M.P. Parameswaran, KSSP, Parishad Bhavan Trichur, Kerala – 686004)*