

Panchayat elections - mounting expenses and declining morals in Himachal Pradesh

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Much of water has flown down the Ganges since 1978, when people voted the men whom they considered to be 'fair' in dealing with dispute resolution or conflict management. In those days, there were hardly any external financial resources available to Panchayats, so Pradhans depended upon 'human resources' available at their command for infrastructure development. Therefore, while choosing the Pradhan, people gave highest marks to a candidate who can command 'respect' and whose word is accepted by people to put up *buwara* (collective labour for community work) say for construction of school building or a room for Health Worker, rejuvenation of old *bawari* etc.

Things slowly started changing from mid 1980s. BDOs started having funds for 'development' and thus accessing these funds became criteria for electing the Pradhan. Therefore, people started choosing a candidate who belonged to ruling party and whose word is respected by bureaucracy at Block Development Office or by a MLA. Candidates moved from door to door and after getting elected usually gave a *Dham* (community meal). Candidates always depended on 'whisper campaign'.

By mid 1990s, there were structural changes within election campaign. 73rd Amendment brought reservation for women and Dalits. First time during 1995, I observed posters pasted all over the place. But the most heartening thing was a Mahila Mandal, women got together to campaign for their candidates wherever seats were reserved for women. Groups of women walked from home to home, village to village campaigning and distributing posters / handbills. Participation of Dalits was still a low-key affair especially in Kangra, Mandi and upper Himachal. People voted on line with *rishtedari-biradari* and in most of the places, for a candidate who belonged to ruling party. Suitable candidate for panchayat work was the last thing on their mind whilst voting.

As far as the election of women candidate is concerned, the family of woman candidate got highest marks. Women belonging to class three or Class four government employees contested the elections in large numbers. People also gave weightage to 'wife of a babu at Tehsil or DC Office' as the 'babu' would be able to mobilize more resources for the Panchayat. Expenses on election campaign still were a low-key affair.

The drastic change was first time felt during 2005 elections. This was the election where 'Up-Pradhan' was indirectly elected. Thus, a ward member aspiring for Up-Pradhan post started spending money on 'other like minded candidates for ward members'. Supply of liquor increased substantially. On an average, for becoming a ward member, candidates spent 5-6 thousand rupees— they were expecting 'return on this with handsome dividend'. Husbands of women ward members received 'good amount along with sufficient quantity of liquor.'

Election expenses for Pradhan's post rose to 50 to 60 thousand rupees. But one thing since 1978 to 2005 was no state level leader (MLA or Minister) directly campaigned for any candidates nor supported their 'cronies' with finances.

The state did two things before announcing the elections – 50 percent reservation for women and direct election to the post of Up-Pradhan (without reservation).

2010 elections broke all the previous records of decency. State level leaders directly participated in the election at personal level and with financial support (at many places MLA or her/his son distributed cash for *chai-paani* to workers openly). Ministers and MLAs travelled extensively supporting their crony. Independent candidates were bought – ranging from 20 to 50 thousand rupees. Liquor and meat, cash was also distributed – usually the one candidate paid twice the amount previous candidate paid. In large number of Panchayats across Himachal Pradesh, the average expenses were not less than Rs 400,000 to 500,000. In many Panchayats, the expenses went beyond one million. Ward member election had an average expense of Rs. 20 to 30 thousand. For the post of BDC and Zilla Parishad expenses were not less than Rs. 200,000 to 500,000. In many places, for a ZP election an amount of one million rupees was considered to be OK. In the plain areas of Solan district, every evening a household would receive Royal Stag bottle along with Rs. 100 note from one or the other party and it went on for 14-15 days.

Women candidates, no longer undertook *padayatra* with Mahila Mandal women; they moved with their relatives and party workers (male and female) in taxis. The Family members of women candidates were in forefront in supply of liquor. The main gainers were liquor vends and taxiwalas. Simple posters / handbills were replaced with plastic flexes measuring 8 to 10 sq feet with photographs of candidates and election symbol. Illuminated posters were pasted all over the places. Vehicles with mike moved with slogans all over the places from morning to late evening. However, many candidates from marginalized classes moved from door to door, people welcomed them very warmly. The State Election Commission became the most ineffective machinery.

Main consideration for choosing the candidate for Pradhan / Up-Pradhan's post was not only *rishtedari-biradari*, but also candidate belonging to ruling party. In large number of Panchayats, people chose candidates belonging to both parties- if the Pradhan belonged to BJP, then Up-Pradhan was from Congress or viceversa. Asked about this, most people responded by saying that the elections for State are just 18 months away and no one is sure who would return to power, so it is better to play safe.

However, since 1987, it is the fact that, the party which claimed 'victory' in Panchayat elections, did lose power during the following state elections. But no one wants to learn.

Where does all this is leading? If elections were made so costly, how can independent women or people from marginalized classes / castes dare to contest? The Indian democracy has already made elections to State or Nation out of bound for people, and now even the panchayat elections are becoming out of bound for marginalized sections. With this, what kind of social justice, the panchayats would be able to deliver? □