

The curtain on the Theatre of Democracy was lifted about an year ago. Large banners wishing all the residents Happy Diwali, Happy Makrsankranti, Happy New Year, Happy Balmiki Jayanti, Happy anything were seen at various strategic locations. The banners were all similar- on the top was a veritable rogue's gallery of leaders of a political party, right from the head honcho to the local level functionary; then came large pictures of the "prospective" candidate as well as their wives from Ward 15, usually with folded hands, and then almost as an aside the best wishes.

One might wonder why the "prospective" candidate would want to publicise his wife on these posters. The reason is simple- the reservation of various wards in the Municipal Corporation election for women or for Schedule Castes is done much closer to the election time. Hence the candidates make sure they are insured against their ward being reserved for women!

The elections to the local body were supposed to have happened a few months ago. However, first there were some issues with the delimitation exercise which caused some delay and the matter went to court. The elections were finally announced at the end of August.

The hectic activity then began in earnest. The first order of business was to get a party ticket. This was not an easy task since there were typically many candidates for each ticket especially for the ruling party. Placating the also-rans in the ticket sweepstakes was not an easy task and it took a while before the candidates were announced. But this delay led to a peculiar problem- the window for filing the nominations was now reduced to a few days and all of them were in the inauspicious time of "pitrpaksha" when no self-respecting north Indian would even buy a washing machine leave alone file her nomination!

However, it is not for nothing that the Brahmins, especially those knowledgeable in the *shastras* are called wise- the *pandits* came up with a solution. One particular day it turned out was not so inauspicious. And so it happened that on that Tuesday every candidate filed a nomination bringing the city to a standstill with long motorcades of "supporters".

In most constituencies, there were several independent candidates- despite their efforts to balance communities and accommodate local bigwigs and high command diktats, the ticket distribution resulted in many dissidents contesting as independents. The intensity of campaigning was remarkable- given that each ward has typically around 20,000 voters and the geographical area is limited, the candidates spared no effort to canvass for votes. Billboards, banners, flags, leaflets were all over the city.

In my own ward, it was a straight fight between the ruling party candidate and the independent incumbent. As it turned out, the two belonged to different communities- one was what is usually called a "local" ( a euphemism for a non-refugee) while the other was a

“Panjabi”. But what was common between the two was that both were enormously wealthy. And it showed.

The autorickshaws blaring campaign songs based on popular Hindi film songs started their rounds at 9 am and went on till 9 pm. There was hardly an electric pole or anything vertical which did not sport a banner or a billboard. The roads were littered with 4-color leaflets. And then there were the localised public meetings where the candidate and his/her supporters would arrive typically in a motorcade of swank SUVs and give their rehearsed spiel about improving security, water supply, roads etc. The meetings were sparsely attended despite the lavish solid and liquid comestibles- the plastic plates and the empty Royal Stag bottles which one saw in the morning testified to this. Swachh Bharat indeed.

Now all this I am sure costs serious money- the expenditure limit for the elections was raised just before the elections to Rs. 5 Lakhs. The campaign would have cost the candidates several times that amount. The expenditure observers seemed to have taken a particularly lenient view of this.

The climax for the theatre of democracy was of course election day. At 7 am when I went to cast my vote at the local school the place was empty apart from the election officials. They were setting up the booth and so after some time I voted. I have always ensured that my vote goes to the candidate who is sure to lose- typically one with the airplane symbol who will possibly get 10 votes; 9 from their family and friends and mine. However, this time that was not an option. So silently thanking the election commission for NOTA, I pressed the button.

The number of voters being small, the results started coming in almost immediately after the elections and were all declared by 8pm. The ruling party got only 12 of the 35 seats, the rest going to independents. It seemed like a big victory for democracy and I was elated. And since everyone in our country is a veteran political analyst, I too started conjecturing on the results. The delinking of local issues from national issues, the irrelevance of supermen with large chests and the unpopularity of recent economic measures etc. were some of the reasons I thought why the people had rejected the ruling party.

The denouement though had to come- within a day of the results, it was announced that 6 independents had “joined” the ruling party. And the next day another 8 had done the same! The lure of plum posts and maybe naked horse trading seemed to have worked. Never mind the will of the people. The theatre of democracy had indeed come to a tragic end.

[Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com](mailto:Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com)

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