

Public Accountability in Elections
(Praja Manifesto Campaign)

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On behalf of the National Election Forum

This is an experiment we started in 2014. The idea behind this is to change the narrative on elections in a paradigm manner.

We started by setting up the National Election Forum (NEF) at Visakhapatnam a few months prior to the 2014 General Elections. NEF comprises a few concerned NGOs and individuals interested in bringing in basic electoral reform at the grass-root level.

NEF's objective is to enhance accountability of the legislators to their respective constituencies by generating a discussion within each constituency on the problems faced by the people and the kind of assurances that need to be secured *in writing* from the candidates for resolving those problems. No doubt that a written commitment such as this one may not have any legal value but it can be used to name and shame a candidate, in case he/ she fails to deliver.

Pre-2014 effort:

Our experiment started largely with the residents of the low-income colonies who deliver essential services for the city but are deprived of the basic amenities that a citizen is entitled to.

As a city, Visakhapatnam has grown rapidly over the decades in terms of its population and building activity. Lakhs of workers migrated during the successive decades from the neighbouring districts to build the city and provide its more affluent residents, the auxiliary services they needed. Today, more than 40% of the city's population comprise of migrant workers living in sub-saharan conditions, mostly on government lands abutting the railway track, the hill slopes and the other comparatively more inhospitable areas. Their colonies are usually referred to contemptuously as "slums", a euphemism for the low-income colonies that the urban planners of the city had largely ignored in their expensive, undemocratic city planning exercises.

To start with, during 2014, NEF visited many of these low-income colonies in and around the city, a few villages in the semi-urban rural areas and a few adivasi regions near AP-Odisha border to mobilise their support for the electoral reform campaign in the following manner.

We started by asking the people whether the legislator elected from the local constituency in the previous election in 2009 had visited the ward/ village at all, if so, how many times. The usual answer to this was in the negative. We asked them whether they had tried meeting the legislator in person for getting their respective problems redressed. Their usual answer was that it was difficult to meet the legislator, surrounded by his/ her henchmen and the security personnel. Many said that the legislator's personal staff sometimes visited their locality but they rarely had time to discuss their problems and find solutions. The so-called "people's representatives" with a few exceptions led expensive lifestyles. Many of them were more interested in appropriating land and other public resources wherever they could, as long as they were in a position of authority.

We explained to the people that the government's revenue came from the indirect taxes the people paid on the purchases made by them to meet their daily needs. The legislators' salaries come from the State's revenue. They usually lived in government housing. Their transport is paid from the taxpayers' money. The least that the legislators should do, therefore, is to remain fully accountable to the voters who elected them to the public offices.

We then posed the question: “Don't you think that the elected legislator should report to you frequently to explain what he/ she has done to get your day-to-day problems resolved?” The idea was to trigger a discussion on each colony's specific problems and the need for accountability of the elected representatives to the voters in making efforts to solve those problems.

In the din of any election campaign by the political parties, the voters feel befuddled by the “manifestos” of individual political parties which had no relevance to the voters' day-to-day problems. What the residents of the low-income colonies wanted was to secure ownership rights over the government lands on which their kutcha houses stood, a decent shelter for living, availability of potable water, sanitation, public health facilities within reach, schooling for their children etc. We posed the question to the residents of each colony: “Who knows your day-to-day problems better- is it you or a contesting candidate coming from outside?” This question usually drew resonance from the low-income communities, who were directly at the receiving end of the problems. The problems (sanitation, drinking water, ownership rights to house sites etc.) faced by the residents of each ward are best known to those living there, not to any outsider.

Usually, the candidates seeking votes at the time of the elections approached them, offering money/ liquor/ saris etc. We encouraged the people to work out how much a payment of, say, one thousand rupees per vote (for election to the State assembly) would imply in terms of its daily equivalent. It works out to less than a rupee per day. Should the voter give away his/ her precious vote without demanding a written assurance on solving his/ her problems? The purpose of raising such a question is to generate a discussion and a debate on the need for the legislator's accountability among the voters in each colony.

Usually, the communities in these colonies are split in terms of their affiliations to one political party or the other. More often than not, the political parties make use of their large numbers to give visibility to their rallies and dharnas, rather than visiting them frequently and solving their problems. When the colony residents held several rounds of discussion on the questions posed to them, they tended to rise above their narrow political affiliations and become better organised to demand from the candidates assurances on specific problems. After all, the concept of a democracy should derive its strength from dissent, discussion and debate. We found that more frequent the rounds of discussion on the above lines was, the greater was the unity evolving among the voters in each colony.

Against this background, we got the residents of the different colonies to gather at one place, interact closely on their problems and make a list of them, along with the possible redressal measures, essentially in the form of a “*Manifesto*” for that colony. NEF acted as the facilitator in getting them together and helping them prepare their colony manifestos. NEF held several rounds of discussion to familiarise the people with the preparation of workable manifestos. This exercise called for elaborate guidance and effort, as it was comparatively a new ground that we as well as the colony residents were covering.

The process of discussion among the residents of a colony/ village had several advantages. First, it gave them an opportunity to think of the real problems faced by them collectively and consider the kind of practical help they would require. Secondly, the fact that all the colony members/ village residents gathered at one place and interacted, irrespective of the political party to which they were affiliated and irrespective of their caste groupings, helped them to come together and think as an integrated community.

While the manifestos usually differed from colony to colony and village to village, one common requirement would be that, whosoever would seek votes from that colony/ village should give a written undertaking that he/ she would meet them once every three months and report to them on the efforts made in solving their problems. This is, in fact, the most crucial component of the

Manifesto. Since it is a manifesto prepared by the people, we called it a “Praja Manifesto”.

Based on our experience, movements such as this one would succeed if the women were at the forefront. The Praja Manifesto campaign therefore emphasised the necessity of involving the women members of each colony.

Ambedkar Nagar: A case study

The residents of a colony, Ambedkar Nagar, mostly women, achieved some success in preparing their Manifesto and demanding that the candidates should affix their signatures to it.

One candidate, a former legislator whose electioneering approach was usually anything but civilised, tried to offer the voters in the colony money/ liquor as usual and thought that it would be a cakewalk in securing their support. However, he was upset when the women demanded that he should sign the Manifesto. He said that he never gave anyone in his constituency a written undertaking and expressed anger at the idea of a manifesto. He went to the extent of threatening them by using intimidating language and saying that he would make them pay a price for their arrogance, once he comes back to power. The women who were prepared for it recorded his threats on their mobiles and re-played the same to the District Collector who responded quickly and requested the senior officers to visit the colony and reassure the residents that no one could threaten them. Criminal cases were filed against the candidate who eventually lost the election.

One important tool that was used by the colony residents was to tell the contesting candidates that, if they failed to sign the Praja Manifesto, the voters would not hesitate to exercise the option of Nota (“None of the Above” option to reject all candidates), a golden opportunity provided by the apex court in one of its landmark judgements on electoral reform.

The women leaders of Ambedkar Nagar have since become a mascot for our Praja Manifesto campaign, as they tasted some success and are in a position to help the voters in the other constituencies. Subsequent to 2014 elections, we witnessed a healthy growth of leadership among the women of this colony who, on their own, have been able to secure solutions to many of their problems. In several other colonies too, where this Praja Manifesto idea had been tried out, many women leaders have emerged, who are not interested in contesting elections but are more anxious to secure accountability from the contesting candidates.

Electoral reform, in our view, should start at the foundational level like this.

2019 elections:

The idea of a Praja Manifesto has taken a firm root among the low-income colonies in the city. The contesting candidates are not usually prepared to affix their signatures to any written commitment, as they have always thrived on false promises and electoral corruption. But, when they visited the colonies of the kind discussed here, they faced considerable pressure from the residents to sign the colony-wise Praja Manifestos. In several cases, as a result of the reluctance on the part of the contesting candidates to sign the Manifestos, the voters per force exercised the NOTA option. This should not discourage us, as this concept of securing accountability from the candidates will surely evolve into something much more long lasting.

One important aspect of this is that, in the case of an election to an assembly constituency, the margin of a win or a loss may be confined to a few hundreds of votes. If a colony has those numbers, it can leverage the election to their advantage. The colony residents have understood this clearly and therefore they have gained self-confidence in their ability to influence the elections to some extent.

One interesting development during the 2019 election was a Praja Manifesto prepared by the homeless voters in the city's shelters. Such shelters came into existence as a result of yet another landmark judgement of the apex court. The NGO looking after a few shelters in the city strived hard to secure voter identification cards for each resident of these shelters. At the time of the 2019 elections, the number of the shelter voters was around 160. They prepared a Manifesto of their own and demanded that whosoever sought their votes should affix his/ her signature on their "Shelter Manifesto" prepared on a stamped paper! To our pleasant surprise, one contesting candidate did come forward and signed on the stamped Shelter Manifesto. Irrespective of the result of the election, this process in itself has generated a belief in the concept of a participative democracy.

GVMC Elections 2020:

We held meetings of the representatives of the low-income colonies at one place during January 2020 as a prelude to the coming GVMC elections. These meetings were not only for the individual colonies coming together but also for specific groups of workers such as construction workers, street vendors and so on, who are entitled to social security benefits under their respective legislations but have been deprived of the same. It was heartening to find that most of these meetings were anchored and conducted by the residents/ workers themselves with minimal support from the NGOs.

During the last week of January, 2020, we held elaborate sessions at each of the three clusters of the colonies, discussed what items their manifestos for the GVMC elections should contain, based on their colony-wise problems and the manner in which they should operationalise those manifestos by asking the corporator-contestants to sign on stamped manifesto documents. During these meetings, there was unprecedented enthusiasm among those present, with the colony women participating in large numbers. In some cases, we had to personally visit some far-flung colonies to understand their problems first-hand and help them in formulating their respective manifestos.

To our surprise, we came across a colony of Yeruklas, an adivasi community from Nellore, who had migrated to Vizag a decade ago, in search of livelihoods. In a way, in addition to preparing the manifestos, this exercise has also helped us in seeking immediate help from the concerned officers to redress the problems of such colonies independent of the electoral process.

Conclusion:

Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the third President of the United States (1801–1809) rightly observed:

"When the people fear the government, there is tyranny. When the government fears the people, there is liberty."

A time has come when we should no longer settle for an electoral system which subjugates the voter to the elected elite. This narrative should necessarily change. The voter is as important as the elected legislator, who should feel answerable to the voter throughout the five-year term during which he/ she holds the public office.

The Praja Manifesto idea, in my view, is a humble beginning to bringing about a fundamental attitudinal change among the voters. For more than seven decades, we have witnessed how the electoral processes are becoming more and more expensive, more and more corrupt and more and more driven by the self-interest of the political parties and their mafia cohorts than the interests of the people at large. This is a toxic trend that is progressively eroding the public trust in governance based on a democratic system. We cannot afford to allow this trend to continue unchecked.

Unless the members of the Panchayats, the corporators in the municipalities, the legislators in the State Assemblies and the members of the Parliament feel that they cannot afford to ignore the interests of the voters who have elected them, we cannot call ourselves a democracy.

We sincerely hope that the Praja Manifesto idea will catch up and spread like a wild fire to cleanse the electoral process throughout the country.