In the Lok Sabha elections 2019, most voters faced the proverbial horns of a dilemma. These voters who want a non-communal, non-corrupt government have, on the one hand, voted for a particular party whose record in combating communalism and corruption belies its lofty rhetoric of upholding values of honest politics and secularism. On the other hand, some may have voted for a new party, whose unique selling pitch is its tirade against corruption, and whose new-ness has ensured that it has no real record of malfeasance.

However, these two choices—though made in desperation—have a fatal flaw built into them: they are stopgap solutions and have consequences for the future of the polity, society, and the environment for the next 10 or 20 years. As far as electoral representation is concerned, if the abovementioned dilemma gets resolved momentarily by choosing the lesser evil, throughout the next several decades, we shall only be electing the lesser evil.

One can appreciate why many voters are desperate. The Indian first-past-the-post electoral system with the minoritization of thousands of communities often leaves people with little choices other than the short-term, stopgap ones. Often, voters operate based on guesswork over how best not to waste one's vote, and also get some short-term benefit by choosing the lesser evil. More often, one hopes that the short-term choices have no long-term destructive consequences.

It is crucial, therefore, to have a new type of political conversations, which ensures long-term solutions to our current problems. Our powerless-ness and hopeless-ness during elections should encourage debates over long-term changes in politics, society, and environment. As many have started to recognize, deepening democracy and combating communalism and corruption cannot happen during elections alone. What we do and say after an election, anticipating the next, buffers us from powerless-ness and can truly give us a choice. Accordingly, we can think of education, workers' rights, and environmental protection as part of a multi-pronged strategy for providing us with better choices during elections.

We must have political conversations over issues that are useful in the long-term. Education is fundamental if one is to live in an empowered society. In recent times, Goa has seen the demand for government aid for English as a medium of instruction at the primary schooling level. In terms of higher education, we are witness to spirited fights for securing the right for education and employment in universities through affirmative action.

The importance of education and the discrimination therein should impress upon all the need for affirmative action in our schools and universities. The empowerment of a generation of

young persons, otherwise excluded from these spaces, will create a citizenry that contributes to equal or equitable social relations. Currently, schools and universities are battlegrounds where the marginalized lose out to the privileged. The reason is that schools and universities have not provided equal opportunity for all. By leveling the field through education, the electoral process will see the participation of young voters who are not easily swayed by demagoguery or false promises.

Another theme for a political conversation is migrant workers and the bogey of 'vote-banks'. Some of us get enraged by 'vote-bank' politics when the truth is that it denies a large section of the population their basic rights. These workers provide vital labor and hence, rather than rail against the 'vote-bank', we need to be sensitive to the matter of their fundamental rights. Securing the rights of workers such as minimum wage, health insurance, housing and enforcing these rights in good faith empowers a constituency to be not exploited by the vote-bank politics of the national and regional parties.

Protecting the fundamental rights of migrants have advantages for locals as it strengthens the rule of law internally. One can see an interesting parallel with the denial of basic rights to migrant labor and the crisis facing Goa's mining-dependent, or the locals. In the case of the mining-dependent, the government had no safeguards against rampant illegalities and the economic fluctuations of an industry based on the whims of the global capitalist players. The mining-dependent, much like the migrant labor, are expendable in the larger scheme of the capitalist-party politics nexus. The mining dependents form a large group of people whose destiny depends on the goodwill of politicians and big businesses. They, too, vote but hardly control their destiny.

Thinking of workers' rights and mining dependents, we can easily see the connections with environmental degradations. More and more people are pushed into doing the work for large, capital-intensive industries like mining and construction in the name of 'development'. This 'development' often occurs by flattening forests or filling prime agrarian land. Every successive election sees an intensification of the destruction of the forests and the communities that call these forests their home. Together with the communities which depend on agriculture and mining, the forest-dwelling communities form another chunk of voters. It is best if the electoral process does not deny these communities an independent say, so they also contribute to the common good.

In each of the issues I have discussed above, there is currently a tremendous opposition from privileged members of our society, blinded by the caste and class privileges they enjoy. In such a context, a change in political conversations emphasizing social justice above everything else will alter the rules of the electoral game. Taken together, then, an emphasis

on equal access to education, securing rights and protection for workers, and preventing environmental degradation promotes the empowerment of many voters who vote due to powerless-ness rather than out of free choice. Without truly empowered voters there are no democratic choices.

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