

India is a democracy. This is supposed to mean rule by the people, or their representatives.

But if you check out with voters - at least in Goa - you will find that most do not like many of the decisions of the government; that some voters might be even furious about the actions of the government; and that almost everybody feels helpless. For example, when the members of the Goa government recently awarded themselves a hike in pay - how many of the voters of Goa agreed with this decision? How many voters in Pernem support the recent zoning changes proposed by the government, converting huge swathes of non-settlement zone land into settlement, that too when Pernem is already facing a crippling shortage of drinking water? How many voters in Panjim like the incessant building projects and roadworks, and exorbitant projects of what can only be called uglification of the city? How many voters across Goa like the great seemingly-unstoppable land-grab, which directly imperils the environment as well as the lives of all vulnerable peoples, even as there remains - according to official sources - a backlog of 16,000 hectares of destroyed Goan forest waiting for afforestation?

Also, shouldn't people in the government face punishment for their many and growing failures? Wouldn't parents of Goan schoolchildren strongly desire some punishment for the government officers responsible for midday meals, under whose watch worm-ridden food was served to schoolkids - instead of just dropping one supplier and getting another of their choice? And wouldn't we have expected some punishment similarly for the scandalous collapse of the Kala Academy after spending crores of public money on its supposed repair? And for the absolutely criminal poisons like formalin being added to our fish?

The list can go on and on - especially if you include what the central government has been doing of late, like arresting journalists under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). What seems to be increasingly clear is that, although we are formally a democracy, the people have very little say in what the government does, nor can we hold them accountable for their actions. Instead, we have governments who work towards their own interests, who function in a completely non-transparent fashion, and who often use force against the people to get their way, so that, increasingly, the only way the people can find themselves heard is through extra-electoral and popular action, i.e. by taking to the streets. We saw this with the long farmer agitation in Delhi, and in Goa with the IIT Goa campus and other projects, and with the Pernem zoning proposal now - the government ignores the people, pushes ahead with its projects with all speed and force, and only backs down when faced with a desperate populace ready to fight and to suffer the consequences. Is this rule by the people?

Now elections are on us again. State-level polls have been announced for five states, which the media is describing as the preliminary round for the general elections next year. But who

believes that elections will improve things?



Resignation or cynicism is the norm. We have come to believe that things will not change, even that they cannot change. We think that democracy can only be this frustrating experience of voting for the 'lesser evil', or for charismatic politicians, with all the back-slapping and first-name-basis friendliness common in Goa, or for the politician who scatters the most money; and then of finding even our basic means of sustenance coming under threat from the government's actions; and of being inordinately grateful when they keep even one small people-friendly promise.

Can't democracy be more meaningful?

But it was not always like this. As David Graeber and David Wengrow point out in their international bestseller *'The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity'* (2021), people of the past, in different parts of the world, developed different ways to ensure that they would not be taken for a ride by those who were given power. For example, long before parliamentary democracies appeared in the world, in Tlaxcala (an indigenous American republic in the Mexican region, and contemporary of the Aztecs), those who aspired to join the ruling council were not expected to display any personal charisma, nor to outdo their rivals in any competition. Instead, they had to display intense self-deprecation, or even shame. They were required to subordinate themselves before the people, to face public criticism and abuse - in order to destroy any sense of ambition - and then, to undergo a long period of seclusion in which the aspiring politician suffered ordeals of 'sleep deprivation, fasting, blood-letting, and a strict regime of moral instruction'.

Ancient Greek writers, meanwhile, spoke of how elections usually throw up charismatic leaders with tyrannical aspirations. This knowledge of the dangers of elections is why, according to Graeber and Wengrow, for most of European history, the truly democratic way of filling offices was assumed to be by lottery.

If things could be different in the past, why do we imagine that they can't change now? There have been moves from the government itself for change, but of the cosmetic variety - like the None-Of-The-Above (NOTA) option while voting, which is a toothless tiger since even a majority of NOTA votes means nothing electorally. And the recently-cleared Women's Reservation law, which is not going to be implemented in many of our lifetimes. After all, why would those in power want to rock the boat?

But there are lots of much better ideas in the air - outside the establishment. Like the demand to change from the first-past-the-post system to that of proportionate representation, where power does not go to just those who the most votes in each constituency, but gets shared according the total number of votes polled by everyone. Or the demand for a recovery of the separate electorates system, broached by Dr Ambedkar and

accepted by the British government of India during the Round Table Conferences, where
oppressed and vulnerable communities get their own representatives. Then there is the right
to recall the elected, which already exists in some other countries. Another good idea would
be to allow only one term in power per individual at any level, so that 'career politicians'
become a thing of the past, and more people get a chance to take part in politics. An income
and property cap, or 'creamy layer' restriction, is surely required too, to keep the current
millionaires and billionaires out, and bring politics a bit closer to the ground reality of the
average voter.

All these ideas, and more, are hardly impossible to achieve. Maybe it will take time but we
have to push for change now, or just watch as this dictatorship-in-the-name-of-democracy
finishes whatever is left of our world.

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