

OVERSEAS INDIANS: POSTAL VOTING AND A FEW QUESTIONS

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When the suave Arun Jaitley introduced his electoral bonds scheme in 2017, few could understand then that it was a very smart sleight of hand operation that ‘legitimised’ funding of political parties even by suspiciously-anonymous donors. By April 2019, the ruling party had bagged 95 percent of these very opaque funds, but we may never know what quid pros were given to the benefactors. Another such quick-fingers manoeuvre is clearly decipherable in the Election Commission’s sudden revelation that, if the Central government so desired, the facility of casting ‘postal ballot’, which is presently reserved only for those who on election or defence duty within India, can also be extended to NRI (non resident Indian) voters. The timing is interesting — just when three tough non-BJP ruled states go to polls in the next few months. Avay Shukla has recently explained, quite convincingly, in his popular blog, why government should first consider the plight of 35 percent of voters who reside in India but cannot cast their votes by post because this facility is not available to ‘migrants’ working outside their local polling areas. He has also argued that, in addition to these 30-32 crore migrants, two other groups in India surely deserve consideration for voting by post. These are ‘people with disabilities’ who number some 2.3 crores and the 1.4 crore oldest senior citizens, above the age of 80.

The Election Commission has admitted that it has no country-wise data of NRIs eligible to vote, but current estimates hover between 60 and 90 lakhs. The EC has proposed that, to begin with, the new NRI postal ballot system may be implemented for those in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Australia, Germany, France, and South Africa. It is not clear why NRIs in the UK are kept out. The fact that all the Gulf countries are also excluded because the regimes are non-democratic does not go well with Kerala. Even elsewhere, the present Election Commission’s proposals are viewed with wariness ever since its very controversial conduct of the parliamentary polls in 2019. The priority that the Commission accorded to the USA further complicates the issue, since it is a demonstrated fact that a large section of NRIs there, from certain parts of India, are enthusiastic supporters and financiers of the Hindu Right.

As the question of NRIs and their voting rights have come into public focus, let us also be fair enough to gratefully acknowledge their remittances to India. Of the world’s total migrant population of 27 crore, Indians account for 1.75 cores. In 2018, the World Bank estimated that Indian expatriates remitted \$79 billion — the highest in the world — followed by China at \$67 billion and Mexico with \$36 billion. These remittances constituted more than one fifth of the country’s precious foreign exchange

and 2.9 % of India's GDP. But, frankly, most NRIs hardly know enough about India's micro-level domestic elections and are really not affected by the outcomes of voting. In any case, NRIs in Western and developed countries would surely be more interested in settling there rather than return, though a section would never give up its Indian citizenship. Hence, granting them special facilities for voting through a complicated procedure does not appear to be really that vital. Besides, vote or no vote, remittances are hardly impacted — 60 percent go to their families and they invest 30 percent in banks, shares and property. It is heartening to learn that families back home still matter a lot to many settled abroad, as their parents must have toiled all their lives to ensure their success in life overseas.

This brings us to a delicate issue that concerns a section of Indians who studied in India and then merged into the Western world, to enrich foreign corporations and themselves. In this nation of 'first boys', most availed of the best education that India could offer at vastly subsidised costs. Though fees appear to have skyrocketed in recent years, the budget of the ministry of Education reveals that it still subsidises elite institutions like IITs, IIMs and NITs so heavily that precious little is left for countless other less privileged universities and colleges and millions of their students. It is, therefore, not very unreasonable to hope that the meritorious recipients of such education, who are now an integral part of the West's technological hegemony, do something beyond assisting their rich masters strengthen their asphyxiating grip over hapless citizens all over the planet.

These strong words are meant for those who are worshipped in India as exemplars of meritocratic success abroad. When nations and crusaders struggle so hard to inject some degree of social responsibility into brazenly profit-racking domineering technology companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple and Microsoft, we get into raptures when someone of Indian origin holds an important post in them. When an 'Indian' who headed PepsiCo was wildly celebrated, few recalled that she was also responsible for dream-selling a dangerously unhealthy product and squeezing profits unethically from the young. One can cite many other 'Indians' who lead strangling western behemoths in investment banking, computer hardware, consumer goods and so on. While families and friends may bask vicariously in their success, the common terribly-manipulated Indian customer is entitled to ask: "What good are they — to India and her common folk?"