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Votes are not commodities

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We live in a world where market forces are in utter domination. Commodities, in the economic sense, are meant for trade based on demand and supply. Markets seek to ensure that trade is carried out efficiently — making parties involved in exchange better off without making anyone else worse off (Pareto optimality).

The question now is — what should be the scope of

commodities involved in market exchange? Commodities such as TVs, mobile phones, automobiles, jeans, jackets, etc., do not raise eyebrows when traded in the market. iPhones are prohibitively expensive yet Apple prices the products based on demand. Economically speaking, the demand-supply curve determines the equilibrium price (cost of an iPhone), and therefore, allocation of the good happens efficiently.

Economists would argue that customers who value it (begrudgingly or otherwise) would certainly pay for it. So far, so good. But what if market norms start invading non-market items too? In other words, what if market forces began operating in areas which could never be thought of as commodities?

Commoditization of civic duty

Vote, a civic duty, is one of the defining features of a modern democracy. In our country, during elections, the citizen feels truly empowered and proud that she is deciding the fate of who is going to govern her. Yet it's not uncommon in India to hear voters being bribed by political parties to cast the vote in their favour. In other words, vote — a non-market entity, has become a commodity that can be purchased (by the political party) from the citizen. Should the political party that is able to pay the maximum price for a vote, to win an election, be allowed to get away? A firm believer in market

theory, detached from ethical reasoning, may think it is justified. The political party gets what it values from the voter. The transaction has made the parties better off without making anyone worse off.

However, Michael J. Sandel, an American political philosopher, argues that it is unethical to trade a civic duty on two counts — fairness and corruption. This reasoning can be extended to vote-buying as well:

According to the fairness argument, the political party, by bribing the voter, is undermining the level-playing electoral space. The voter's choice of whom to vote is unduly influenced by such enticements. Those parties that are willing to play by the rules of the game and compete fairly are adversely affected.

Next, vote-buying amounts to corruption as it replaces a higher norm (thoughtfully voting for the right candidate or political party)

with a lower norm (voting to make money). It substitutes an intrinsic reason (carrying out civic duty responsibly) with an external reason (lure of money).

Agents influencing principals

Beyond commoditization of vote, vote-buying is also a principal-agent problem. The principal (voter) is being bought by the agent (candidate/political party). The agents are bribing the principals to influence the electoral choice. Clearly, the representative elected by vote-buying will undermine voter's collective interests in pursuit of his/her personal gain. When the principal (voter) is unable to perceive the link between her vote and the consequences to her life; vote becomes a purchasable commodity, and voters resort to short-term maximisation.

Costs of vote-buying and populism

In the recently concluded elections across Indian states such as Telangana, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, allegations of vote buying were common. It appears as if political parties have lost faith in persuading citizens through concrete programmes for the development of society. Instead votes are being bought unabashedly. Further, governments — both Union and State, at the moment, have been able to perfect substitution of governance with delivery of freebies; only public infrastructure needs are partially addressed. In other areas such as — education, healthcare, public service delivery, basic amenities and rule of law, outcomes are terrible.

In education, according to ASER 2018, nearly half the students of Class V cannot read texts meant for Class II. In 2009, India was ranked second last among 73 countries that participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) Survey by Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) only above Kyrgyzstan.

In healthcare, the out-of-pocket expenditures push more than 55 million people into poverty in 2011-12. The annual government health expenditure in India is close to a paltry 1% of GDP. Inadequate investments have crippled healthcare systems in India - from primary to tertiary levels.

Public service delivery is dysfunctional and corruption-ridden in India. According to 'India Corruption Study' conducted by Centre for Media Studies (CMS) in 2018, 75% households across 13 states felt that the level of corruption has increased or remained the same during the last one year, while 27 per cent confessed to paying a bribe to avail public services in the last one year.

Basic amenities such as roads, electricity, traffic management, water supply, sanitation, among others are in miserable shape.

Recently, the Supreme Court observed that, in the past 5 years (2012-17), potholes had killed more people (15,000) than terrorism in India.

Leaving aside riot control, the rule of law is in shambles in India. The plethora of lynchings across India, and the recent Bulandshahr violence where even a police officer was not spared only reiterate this point. Weak rule of law affects the poor more adversely. This is evidenced by the fact that nearly 65% of undertrials languishing in prisons in India come from economically weaker background.

Delinking of vote and public good

Clearly, our governments are either ignoring core functions of governance, or failing miserably in generating outcomes. Yet the voter in India seems to have helplessly reconciled to this situation. She sees no link between her vote and the public good that ought to be delivered. Therefore, short-term

gains obtained in the form of money and freebies such as unemployment allowances, free electricity, farm loan waivers, TV sets, mixer grinders, laptops and bicycles, etc. promised by various political parties seem to satisfy her. The voter is not enabled to realise that the funds for fulfilling these perverse promises, made by political parties, are at the cost of her child's education or her well-being (health) or for her household's water connection or for the road she uses to commute to work or increasing the police personnel meant to ensure her safety.

In modern society, very few have been able to convincingly make an

argument against the operation of free market. But does this mean, we allow market norms to encroach upon our civic duties where the highest bidder ends up capturing it. Given this, how is a vote's intrinsic value to be restored?

To begin with, the state must ensure good governance by delivering in areas of education, healthcare, public services, rule of law and basic amenities. Perhaps, this will nudge the voter to see the intrinsic worth in her vote. Once this happens, she will soon realise that votes are not commodities. ■