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Unanimous Elections in Panchayati Raj Institutions Democratic Choice or Enforced Consensus: A Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Democracy works on the principle of free and fair elections conducted by a regulated electoral process wherein the majority choice determines the outcome while leaving room for dissent. India has centuries old embedded democratic tradition of local self- governance in the form of Panchayats. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 followed by the State conformity Acts aimed to create, ensure and expand this representative space for the historically marginalized in India through reservation and assured elections. The democratic choice in electing a representative through one elector one vote is provided to all citizens. The trend of consensus candidates and uncontested elections in Panchayats assisted by incentives is steadily picking up across States.Therefore concerns arise that such elections becoming pervasive will adversely impact inclusive democracy guaranteed by universal suffrage. The article examines various aspects of the incentivized emerging pattern to reshape representative democracy and concludes that upholding the right to free choice is essential for local democracy to flourish. The author aims to bring the much required discussion on unanimous elections and long-term outcomes for democracy to the forefront of academic and public discourse.

Keywords: Unanimous Elections, Grassroots Democracy, Panchayat Elections, Consensus Candidate, Panchayats Incentives, Gram Sabha Elections

Introduction:

John Stuart Mill the nineteenth century Utilitarian political theorist questioned mankind that if all "minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person was of the contrary opinion" would mankind be more justified "in silencing that person" if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

The above famous quote by J.S. Mill in Essay "On Liberty' published in 1869 profoundly influencing political thought through ages raises the vital question of civil and social liberty of an individual and imposition of society on a dissenting opinion. It concerns the freedom of speech and expression and by extension lays down the fundamental principle of representative democracy. Democracy hinges on free and fair elections, full universal suffrage that presupposes a contested election and the will of people expressed through a secret ballot. In India the 73rd Constitutional Amendment 1992 followed by the State Panchayat Acts aimed to empower historically marginalized for participation in the democratic process in local governance. The representatives of local people in the three tiers of Panchayat system were to be elected directly

A fixed tenure and regular elections were prominent feature among the mandatory provisions in Part IX of the Indian Constitution to provide Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) “certainty, continuity, strength."To fill posts in every Zila Panchayat (District), Janpad (Block) and in village Gram Panchayat reservations of thirty three percent were provided, the number later increased to fifty percent by States. Reservations were to ensure inclusive participation by creating a civic space for the marginalised, women, castes, tribes who went under represented due to existing societal and related constraints.

The reports of unanimous elections in Panchayats from different parts of the country have raised concerns on the functioning of inclusive local governance system envisaged by the Constitution mandate.The constitutionality of the provisions on uncontested elections in The Representation of the People Act, 1951 are often questioned for such elections are viewed as a denial of citizens right to suffrage. The Election Commission considers unopposed winnings to be rare and not to be taken up by Courts(Mahapatra,2025).The validity and acceptability both political and social of such an incentivized emerging trend of uncontested elections in local rural governance institutions and long- term outcomes for political participation of the marginalized needs to be examined.

Brief History of Uncontested Elections in Panchayats:

Uncontested in simple language implies as something not challenged or contested against. In India uncontested elections have been witnessed in Parliament and State elections and even in local governing institutions. In the first general elections to Lok Sabha held from (1951 to 1952)23

candidates won uncontested compared to five in 1957 and three in 1962. In 1971 only one Lok Sabha member was returned uncontested. In the early post-independence elections unopposed candidates were party stalwarts, freedom fighters, social workers. The contribution made to society by them was recognised and thus were accepted unopposed.

The first generation Panchayats were installed on 2nd October 1959 in Nagaur Rajasthan. A Panchayati Raj three tier structure was adopted nationwide following the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee report. Panchayats were generally viewed as non-political village organizations which initially led some communities to prefer the practice of unanimous or consensus candidates to most of the posts. The reasons varied from strong social cohesion, economic disparities, illiteracy, apathy and lack of understanding of administrative processes.

Gradually between 1960-1990 Panchayat elections in several States received cash awards or special incentives to opt for unanimous elections. Kundu & Sumanlata in their study of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Haryana give the following statistics of unopposed Elections in different States:

a) In Rajasthan1960 elections 7394 Gram Panchayats (GP)went to polls. In 1992 GP and 38.8%Sarpanch (GP Head)were elected unopposed. The incentive offered by Rajasthan government was 25 paisa per head of population where Sarpanch and at least 80 % Panchayats were unanimously elected.

b) In 1965 Tamil Nadu reported 40.5 % village Panchayat members and 64.2 % Presidents elected unopposed.

c)In Haryana 1978 elections 950 out of 5260 Gram Panchayats along with Sarpanch in 65 Panchayats were elected uncontested. A total of 370 Panchayats saw all members elected unopposed. In the year 1983, 874 GP out of 5526and Sarpanch in 332 Panchayats were elected without facing a contest.

Andhra Pradesh gave an award of Rs 2500 to village with less than 3000 population leading to7144, out of 15,233 getting elected unanimously(Seshadri,1964).The Punjab government in 1972 promised as grant a one year of revenue to the village for uncontested elections.

The resorting to unanimous elections is thus not a new development in Panchayat elections nor freebies in the guise of incentives. 'Binharif' a unique scheme was introduced in Gujarat as early as 1992 which in the year 2001 was changed to ‘Samras.’ In their study, D Rajasekhar et al. (2017) note that to encourage party-less and unanimous elections at the village Panchayat level some States have adopted innovative methods. Such villages in which Panchayat members are elected through consensus instead of elections attain the status of ‘Samras Gram'. Gram Panchayats opting for unanimous selection were given incentives in the form of grants as encouragement to the villagers.

Post 1993 Trend of Unanimous Elections and Incentives:

It cannot be denied nor overlooked that the offer of incentives by State governments have accelerated the trend of unanimous elections across States. In Haryana incentives offered in 2016 were Rs 50,000 for every unanimously elected Panch. A Sarpanch could muster for the village Rs 5 lakh and for an entire Panchayat elected unanimously Rs 11 lakh. In the elections held 39,249 members including 274 Sarpanchs, 118 Panchayat Samiti members, two Zila Parishad members and 38,555 Panchs were elected uncontested(Express News Service,2016).

In the State of Madhya Pradesh the 2022 Panchayat elections, held after eight years, reported an increase in uncontested elections. According to the information received by the State Election Commission(SEC) 2,27,41 Panch posts were elected unopposed. As against 632 Sarpanchs (year 2014-2015) in 2022 elections 690 Sarpanchs were elected unanimously. In the previous Janpad (Block) Panchayat body elections only 99 members were elected uncontested as compared to 157 in the 2022 elections. The offer of cash incentives to Panchayats by Madhya Pradesh government ranged from Rs 5 lakh for Sarpanch, Rs 7 lakh for the entire Panchayat and Rs 12 lakh on electing a woman unanimously undoubtedly produced satisfactory outcome. The claims that unopposed elections are increasing in the State because an' atmosphere has been created for development' sharply contrasts with instances of boycott owing to lack of basic amenities in the rural areas. It is arguable whether such attractive incentives push the Gram Sabha to opt for unopposed elections in view of the limited resources available at Gram Panchayat level.

Similarly in the State of Uttar Pradesh where electoral outcome is based on caste power equations the number of unopposed candidates in the 2021 Panchayat elections are an aberration. According to State Election Commission 3,19,317 candidates including seven members of Zila Panchayat, 2,005 members of Kshetra Panchayat and 178 candidates for the post of Pradhan of Gram Panchayats were elected unopposed(Economic Times, 02 May 2021). In Southern India, Andhra Pradesh recording an impressive 81.78 poll percentage in 2021 Panchayat elections witnessed 2,197 out of 13,097 Sarpanch i.e 16. 77% and among the 1,31023 ward members, 47,459 amounting to 36.22% as unanimously elected(V Raghavendra, 2021).

More and more States are taking to offering cash incentives and no State can be singled out. The Andhra Pradesh government in 2021 local Panchayat elections announced a financial incentive to villages for unanimous election to the post of Sarpanch and member of Gram Panchayats on basis of Panchayat population starting with rupees five lakh for below 2,000 and between 2,001- 5000 population rupees ten lakh. The amount gradually increases to 15 lakh for Gram Panchayats comprising of 5,001- 10,000 population and above 10,000 populated villages a whopping Rs 20 lakh is offered (The Hindu, 2021).

The Key Factors Influencing Uncontested Elections:

The State sponsored incentives for uncontested election well received in some villages are projected as ‘strengthening local governance.’ The beneficial reasons forwarded are as below:

1) **Social Segregation**: A village is a small community where elections invariably lead to segregation on caste lines.

2) **Poll Violence and village Environment**: Campaigning for individuals and party fuels mutual rivalry which disturbs the peaceful environment of the area and hampers the overall development of the village. The clashes between supporters during the election process often extends beyond elections and conditions become worse when 'rivalry is between a few influential families'.

3) No Party Politics: Unanimous elections are party less elections in most of the Panchayats therefore political rivalry factionalism is not present. The apparent unity bolsters the Panchayati Raj system.

4) Incentives lead to overall village development: In contested elections candidates on winning ignore areas of rival factions. Incentives allow the villages to choose from among their specific requirements and start with development activities, build schools, medical facilities etc. Several examples of Gram Panchayats using incentives for development work in the whole village substantiate the argument.

5)**More Democratic**: Unanimous elections are more democratic as the selected gets total support of local people or at least more than majority. The supporters contend that while 49 %go unrepresented in elections the Samras provided opportunity for entire 100% to decide representatives (Bandi, 2013).

6) Customs and Traditions: Dandi village, Navsari Gujarat famous for the Salt Satyagraha organized by Mahatma Gandhi since 1964 in Panchayat elections puts forth only a consensus candidate. This tradition is followed to date to respect father of the Nation as well as Gandhian followers and workers in Dandi. Likewise, there are many villages that have set up own traditions and customs to field unopposed candidates.

7) **Women Empowerment**: Many Panchayats have elected unanimously women Sarpanch, Panch and all women Panchayats. In Ranai Gram Panchayat, Koriya district(Chhattisgarh) all the women were elected-unopposed including Sarpanch and Panch in every 15 wards (Kaiser, 2025) which otherwise would not have been possible as women shy away from contested elections.

8) **Pragmatic Approach:** Financial incentives have been a regular feature of Panchayati Raj system in almost all States. National Awards and many schemes have been formulated to encourage performance of Panchayats in implementing schemes. It is contended that own finances of Panchayats are in any case negligible therefore if people opt for unanimous elections to add to the finances there should not be anything objectionable in it.

9) Less Electoral Expenditure by Candidates: The poll expenditure limit is fixed by SEC. Local elections become a matter of prestige and the candidates spend far more. Voters are wooed by rivals in number of ways by feasts, cash distribution etc. Post elections while losing candidates get into a debt trap for money is mostly borrowed and often the winning contestant looks for quid pro quo kickbacks.

10) Curtails Irregularities in Elections: Personal rivalry in direct elections makes contesting candidates use unfair and corrupt methods to win. Several irregularities are alleged during election process in nomination e.g. forged signatures as well as impersonation. In many cases disrupting of polling due to disputes between candidate’s supporters leads to closing of the polling booth.

11) Saves Government Election Expenses: Consensus candidates elections reduce the cost of holding as well as other election-related expenses like cancellation of voting, re-polling and EVMs etc. In UP Panchayat elections for an electorate of over 12.5 crore,52croreballotpapers were printed costing about Rs 45 crore whereas for EVMs the cost would have been around Rs 1,500 crore (Mishra, 2021).

From the above a strong case is made for the view that consensus candidates along with incentives is certainly a very viable alternative to direct elections.

Contentious Issues:

The above justification for non-contesting and that Panchayat elections lead to lasting hostility is debatable. National and State elections are more vigorously campaigned frequently resulting in sharp divisions in camps. Moreover the pre-election and post- election party swapping by candidates is accepted by the electors without any obvious protest. The argument that non-party based uncontested elections add to the social harmony in the villages is not tenable on following grounds:

1) Caste is not a homogenous category, inter and intra caste segregation prevails in society which impacts voting behaviour and choice of candidates. Despite reservations candidates from historically marginalized with income inequalities are less likely to become unanimously elected.

2) Contrary to consensus by majority claims Panchayat research studies have pointed out that in the PRIs local elites dominate and are successful in nominating their candidates. The ruling party supporters, relatives of political leaders, even of mafia dons are able to muster unanimous support in Panchayats with political and financial backing. Monetary incentives from the government often assists power brokers in mobilizing the consensus-based support. Bandi in his study of four Gram Panchayats (GP) in Gujarat found that a majority of voters perceived the "Samras" system as undemocratic, arguing that it allowed powerful elites to dictate terms and control the process.

3) The elite capture of Panchayats has always been a challenge to local rural governance and the claim that such incentives lead to overall village development has very few takers.Several research studies provide sufficient evidence of elite capture and dominance of Panchayats including development programmes which are implemented through Gram Panchayats " (D Rajasekar, 2018), or becoming the beneficiaries under the scheme of MGNREGA (Sanjiv K et al, 2020).

4) Unanimous elections are party less elections is a mythin most of the Panchayats. In 2020 Panchayat elections held in Kerala for14 district Panchayats,152 Block and 941 Gram Panchayats a tussle between the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and UDF was widely reported. The LDF led by Communist Party of India (Marxist) grabbed 10 district Panchayats ,108 Block and 514 Gram Panchayats. The Indian National Congress led United Democratic Front (UDF) managed to win in 4 district Panchayats ,44 Block Panchayats and 375 Gram Panchayats (Anshuman, 2020).

5) Panchayat incentives are an additional burden on the exchequer. According to a news report in Andhra Pradesh 2012 the government earmarked Rs 150 crore for Panchayat incentives. The promises made at the time of elections are often delayed or not fulfilled by the State government as most face financial crunch. The Punjab government upon failure to disburse incentives promised in 2008 was directed to do so in three months by the High Court(Express News, 2014). In Haryana the reward money to PRIs amounted to Rs 210crore in 2016 elections.

6) The myth of " apparent unity' is shattered by the number of election petitions and court cases filed by aggrieved candidates. In Nachhattar Singh Vs. State of Punjab the petitioners stated that there was no unanimity in the village and the elections were to "illegally oust the whole community " from the Gram Panchayat. Abducting of candidates, attacks and threats are common occurrences to prevent contested posts. Preventing candidates from filing and rejection of nomination papers expose the network between political parties, local elites and bureaucracy.

7)Several malpractices have crept into the system. Auction of Panchayat posts have been reported in some States.In 2021 Maharashtra Panchayat elections the State Election Commission received written complaints along with video recordings of auctions for Panchayat seats in Umrane village of Nashik and Kondamali of Nandurbar. Incidentally 1,523 villages out of 14,234 Gram Panchayats of Maharashtra returned general consensus candidates(Shantha,2021).In Telangana to elect a unanimous candidate in Gokulapadu village the Sarpanch post was auctioned for a large amount to the highest bidder (Koride ,2025).

Why are the Panchayats and political parties advocating for non- contested elections?

The answer lies in the growing importance of local elections which have come to acquire a political special significance. The linkages to incentives offered can be clearly established. For a political party an assured rural constituency support can have a determining effect in National and State level elections. To consolidate rural base the leaders ,try to influence local population by threat , muscle and money power.In West Bengal Panchayat elections are considered" a weathervane for the political scenario" indicating the direction of political wind at grass roots level(Bhattacharya, 2022).

Gram Panchayat elections are said to be party less yet political parties announce pre-poll support to candidates and in many cases make post poll claims on the winning candidates. Supporters of ruling party and generally of political bosses get elected in a majority of the Panchayats. In Madhya Pradesh as per the data provided by the SEC the number of unopposed elections appear sizeable in constituencies and home district of ministers including former CM. In the Punganur constituency of P Ramachandra Reddy, who happens to be Panchayat Raj minister of Andhra Pradesh,out of 87 villages, eighty-five village Panchayats elected unanimously their Sarpanchs (Samdani , 2021**).**

In this context there is a need to examine the legislative frame work**,** powers and functions of the Gram Sabha established as a "constant permanent body" for a village and the method of arriving at a unanimous decision.

Legislative frame work For Election Procedure:

The term contested and uncontested with regard to elections has been used in The Representation of the People Act, 1951 which regulates the conduct of elections to both houses of Parliament and State legislatures. Contested and uncontested/ unopposed elections are in relation to the number of candidates and seats to be filled. When Candidates are more than seats polling takes place. In Uncontested Elections seats are more or equal hence all candidates are declared as elected.

The Panchayat Acts:

The election of all members of the Gram Panchayat is by the registered voters in the ward by secret ballot. The Acts along with the associated rules detail the procedures for conducting elections, including nomination, withdrawal of candidature, publication of list of contesting candidates, voting, counting, and declaring results. A gist of the main points gathered from various Panchayat Acts is as below:

1. All Panchayat seats are to be filled by direct elections by the people.

2.Procedure in contested and uncontested elections:

a) Contested Elections: If the number of contesting candidate is more than one in any electoral division or village, poll is to take place.

b) Uncontested Elections: If only one candidate with valid nomination remains for any seatthen that candidate is declared duly elected by the Returning Officer.

The term used in acts is direct election, poll, uncontested and contested elections. Consensus candidate or "unanimous election," term not explicitly mentioned is understood as absence of another candidate contesting. This leads to a declaration of that candidate as elected without a formal polling.

Unanimous Election Procedure in Panchayats:

From where does the Gram Sabha derive power to project a consensus candidate?

In most of the States the Gram Sabha performs functions related to identification of schemes, selection of beneficiaries, approving plans, programmes for social and economic development of the village and functions entrusted to the Gram Sabha. The only remote indication in most Panchayat Acts is that 'all matters pertaining to the Gram can be brought before any meeting of Gram Sabha." All matters as far as possible are to be decided " unanimously failing which by general consensus of the members present."

Loop holes in the Panchayat Acts:

No modalities of choosing a person by unanimous finds place in the Acts and one can surmise that the matter can be raised only in a special meeting which can be called only on requisition in writing by a definite number of members as prescribed by law. Who gets to preside in such a meeting in place of current Sarpanch /Up -Sarpanch is important in view of the casting vote. Additionally, a meeting adjourned due to lack of quorum on being re-adjourned can do away with the quorum requirement. This gives ample scope to the influential families and groups to hoist their candidate forefront.

A closer look at the ground level picture of unanimous selections in some of the States indicates and supports the view that there is much manipulation in participatory democracy.' The imposition of group think in deliberations of Gram Sabha leaves little scope for individuals to voice their opinion thereby setting aside the spirit of the Act. The procedure for the unanimous selection of names of members not being spelled out is open to speculation and scepticism.

In the Bairipuram Panchayat in Kaviti Mandal of Srikakulam district the method adopted to take collective decisions on development works and other important matters as claimed by the village head is by inviting " one person from every family " to the village meetings (The New Indian Express, 2021).The Gram Sabha consists of all adult members in electoral roll yet this practice "proudly declared" does not allow participation of all. It is interesting to note that the village with more than 1,300 electorate has never gone to poll since the introduction of the Panchayat Raj system as election is "always unanimous."The very term here is contestable as selection appears more as nomination and cannot be taken as the general will but "will of all." As all registered voters are not present the arbitrary procedure followed evidently suppresses what Thomas Hill Green termed as "positive freedom".

The offer of incentives is more in the nature of a directive by government and pressurized mediations by ministers establishes it further. The selection then by the Gram Sabha must be considered an entrusted task by the government rendering the Panchayat as agent of State government. About 35% village Panchayats under Darsi assembly segment in Prakasam district known as hotbed of factional politics turned unanimous when in several villages legislator Maddisetti Venugopal succeeded in persuading leaders from rival camps thereby consolidating "his grip in the constituency"(Times of India, 2021).

The above raises serious contentious issues as to the legality and authenticity of such contrived unanimous name selection. Aforesaid practice with the direct or indirect support of the Gram Sabha indicates the degree of politicization in the electoral process at the Gram level which only serves to enhance the network between political parties, local elites and bureaucracy. In such a scenario the members of Gram Panchayat the executive body instead of being primarily accountable to the local constituents would presumably serve the interest of local groups assisted by contractors and political big wigs.

Democracy and Induced Consensus:

Dr Ambedkar warned against afore mentioned local nexus and wanted an assurance that every self-governing institution should have inbuilt provisions giving special representation to protect the rights of depressed classes. The objective in providing reservations and direct elections in rural local governance was apparently to protect the rights of the deprived and marginalized. Over three decades of Panchayat elections have revealed that reservations do not lead to representation in the real sense and the current practice of putting forth a unanimous candidate only amounts to making ineffective the democratic vision of the Act.

In the democratic decentralization structure the Gram Sabha has been conceptualized to ensure participation at Gram level of all classes and sections of the village society in taking decisions on matters concerning the village. Such consensus as being promoted is a challenge to the concept of Gram Swaraj which Gandhi said was to be built brick by brick from below by elimination of all forms of domination, oppression and segregation. In local politics the domination is not only that of individuals, families and social groups of upper caste but extends to marginalized intra caste groups who seek to acquire and hold onto power through caste affiliation. Gilles Verniers in a political ethnography study of Uttar Pradesh observes that the politics of the State distinguished by the horizontal caste-based mobilization has receded in favour of local arrangements between parties, candidates and local social groups.

These groups are centres of local power who dominate the Gram Sabha and try to influence or pressurise the electors to concede to uncontested elections. This arrangement records few complaints as the benefits accruing to the hapless villager by way of beneficiary in schemes, loans, overcoming bureaucratic procedures in documents preparation are to name a few**.** Offer of freebies, cash and kind in National and State level elections is a common practice but, in a face to face society with distorted power relations the threats, monetary lures and political backing assume greater significance**.**

The holding of non-elections and declaring one candidate as elected is in itself self- defeating for local democracy. While exit polls are banned for influencing the outcome such prefixed, predicted results must be taken as a gross violation of all norms. There is fine difference between unanimity achieved by realization of common good compared to persuasion and use of subtle force whether of groups in a community, economic or social. The TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu statement that unanimous elections should not be forced on the opposition clearly points at the role of political parties and linkages between ruling party and incentives offered.

Suggestions To Address the Issue:

Given the situation the efforts of Telangana State Election Commissioner N Ramesh Kumar in issuing a warning that undue publicity to financial incentives for Gram Panchayats that elect their Sarpanchs unanimously will be taken as against the democratic spirit underlying the elections can be a starting point for reforms.

a) A strong electoral check over the entire local election process is required but in most States SEC is dependent on State Government. The responsibility of conducting free and fair elections lies with the State Election Commission therefore strengthening the Commission should be made a priority.

b)To stop “forced unanimous” decisions the decentralization laws, contradictory rules and regulations that lead to undermining of the credibility of local elections need to be reframed.

c)The suggestion by The Supreme Court of India of setting up of a "small expert body" to consider a threshold of Minimum percentage votes for Single Contestant for unopposed candidates in elections needs serious consideration.

d)NOTA or none of the above option to cast a vote is upheld by the Supreme Court under Article 19 (1) (a) of the Indian Constitution.Thus holding of polls even if only one nomination is received by giving voters the NOTA option in all Panchayat elections may well be considered necessary to uphold democracy.

e) Election spending and grassroots capacity needs a reality orientation. The poll expenditure limit for various posts needs to be lowered and not raised. Currently the exorbitant election spending discourages individuals from contesting against high net-worth candidates including those supported by party funds.

f)Relaxing candidature requirements in nomination forms and moderation in rejection of forms would prevent last minute withdrawal and validity issues. Fixing only a reasonable minimum amount as security deposits and forfeiture with strict control over election expenditure may encourage more eligible candidates to come out for elections.

g) A relook use of powers by The Gram Sabha, regarded as an informal association formalized by the State Acts ,is imperative. Improvement in the dispute resolution practices by the Gram Sabha may put a check on occurrences of election related violence and prevent disruption of social harmony.

While direct elections cannot be totally avoided or discarded for a situation may arise where the Gram Sabha is absolutely united to put up a consensus candidate. In such a scenario a defined procedure for selection of consensus candidate needs to be established. The quorum for any such special meeting should be uniformly prefixed by law as 80 % of population with majority as 3/4 of those present and voting by secret ballot with no provision of a re-adjourned meeting. Further no person including a family member should be allowed to seek re-election for more than two terms.

Discussion

These issues and outcomes are interrelated and interconnected. Incentives in the longer run do not serve the larger social interest and politically defeat the fundamental precondition of democratic polity. These seemingly overt actions are intrinsically a ploy to circumvent and deny inherent right of an individual. In a faction- ridden society elections based on consensus populism are not always unifying and the claim of social harmony lacks merit. Hinging on political quid pro quo such acts appear merely as an attempt to acquire legitimacy in the guise of local peace and development. The covert process instead of strengthening weakens the foundation of local governance.

Democracy is recognized and accepted as a " universal core value." Consensus candidates without lure of incentives like Dandi village in Navsari should remain as exception. Panchayat elections here are not held "as a mark of respect for Mahatma Gandhi "(Mehta, 2021). All such instances viewed as “example of unity” though provide for good reading cannot be turned into an established practice. Popular sentiments should not be allowed to replace the general will of the electorate. To fill all local body posts in Koppavali village in Tiruchi district women were elected unanimously to promote empowerment women(The Hindu, 2019). Ironically, the woman chosen as village President is said to belong to an influential family which has held the post for a considerable time.

Circumventing contested elections perpetuates old unequal or hierarchical social order andaids corruption by fostering existing nexus. It discourages new leadership from emerging by concentrating power in hands of few influential individuals which does not bode well for democracy. The village conceptualized in the decentralized government as the lowest political unit includes all adults listed in the electoral roll. True democracy according to M.K. Gandhi " cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the centre." It has to be worked from below by the people of every village who are not "authority-controlled."To attain Swaraj it is essential that every individual gets to have a free voice in the local government and the expression thereof.

Much effort is required to safeguard democracy from this unanimous game plan which poses a danger to local democratic institutions and appears to be becoming a dominant strategy to silence the voice of individual voters. J.S. Mill had cautioned that society can issue and execute wrong mandates giving rise to social tyranny which leaves few means of escape. He considered this imposition as "more formidable" than other forms of political oppression. Contested election is one such mandate in which The Gram Sabha " ought not to meddle."

Conclusion:

The Constitution of India grants universal adult franchise to protect and uphold individual autonomy over collective tyranny by affirming 'one person, one vote, one value.' Elections form the core of democracy and regular elections at various intervals mould the base of a vibrant democracy. The unanimity claim stems from collective consciousness for common good or from political expediency is a matter to be scrutinised. Hindering in any manner contested elections at grass roots level prevents effective participation of the weaker sections of the people in a democratic process and is a challenge to the very foundation of progressive democracy.

In democratic India the divine right of monarch or chieftain cannot be assumed and replaced by a collective tyranny which denies the individual's free will to choose and further binds that will to mirror selection of a dominant few. Unanimous election in light of ground realities is an attempt to impose group think by undue influence to exert pressure and consequently denies equal rights to every citizen. If corrective steps are not taken now there will be more villages like electors in Karupampulam village near Vedaranyam in Nagapattinam District who waited decades to cast a vote. The attempts made under a facade of consensus theory to dominate and subjugate individual autonomy needs to be curbed and done away with. Else with 'contrived consensus" democracy will exist in skeleton form sans the 'democratic spirit' contrary to the aspirations of "We the people of India."

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