

# Respecting leaders in a democracy

We do not defer to our rulers. Our equals, they earn our respect only if they perform well



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

Respect for politicians is in short supply in our times. Most citizens of contemporary democracies seem to tolerate, not respect, those they elect. Are we troubled by the absence of respect in politics? Should politicians even be accorded respect? If yes, what form of respect must they get?

**Directive respect: Egalitarian**  
'Respect' has multiple senses, of which three are relevant here. One sense, that might be called 'directive respect', was elaborated by the late 18th century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. For him, respect had the force of an authoritative moral instruction, a directive. Why? Kant understood that humans in their social interactions can never entirely eliminate using one another for personal benefit. When I enter a bus, I approach the conductor not out of love, affection or curiosity, but with one goal in mind: to purchase a ticket to travel. And the conductor is in the bus to do a job for the bus owner: sell tickets. All of us – the passenger, the conductor, the driver and the bus owner – relate to each other as instruments to achieve our respective ends: travel home, earn a livelihood, make profit. However, Kant argued, while this may well be so, each must also keep in mind that we are moral agents with distinct purposes, with our own subjective take on the world, with the capacity to endow the world with meaning, purpose and value. In short, we have inherent dignity that imposes limits on the extent to which we can use each other for personal benefit. I can't treat the bus conductor as a mere thing to be pushed around, offended or humiliated, even as I buy the ticket from him. I must respect him.

To reiterate, the quality of dignity that inheres in a person is the ground for a moral directive not to treat someone only as an instrument to realise my purpose but also always as a person with distinct purposes of her own. Put differently, to respect others is not just to have an attitude, but



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also to act towards humans in a way that does not merely use them. This is what makes it a form of directive respect. In addition to being directive, Kant's notion is also egalitarian. This is because each of us commands this respect regardless of our differential social status or position, class, gender, race, talent or achievement.

**Directive respect: Hierarchical**  
This egalitarian feature alone differentiates it from another instance of directive respect where the quality that commands respect from others inheres not in the person qua person but in the social position she occupies or the role she performs. Thus, children must respect their fathers; wives, their husbands; servants, their masters; lower caste people, those in higher castes; and so on. Indeed, this unequal status is the original site of the idea of respect, its breeding ground. The notion of respect was for long intertwined with ideas of superiority and inferiority and had deep hierarchical overtones. Virtually indistinguishable from fear and deference, it was expressed not only in words but through silence and bodily stances. Thus, a person believed to be inferior could not call a superior by his name; could not look him in the eye; always had his or her head bowed or covered; could not touch any part of the superior person or could, at best, touch only his feet; was always to obey, do as he was told, never question or even respond.

This hierarchical notion of directive respect has not disappeared

from our society (as many had hoped) and continues to permeate social relationships. But disturbingly, just when we thought that because of our anti-colonial struggle and equality-centred reform movements led by Jyotirao Phule, Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, it is fading away from politics, it appears to be raising its ugly head again. Revived here is the older, deeply hierarchical idea of respect as deference which brooks no dissent, muffles voices, demands unquestioning silence from all. It is also being used to elicit obedience to a 'supreme leader'. This appears to be happening not only in India but in many other polities of the world. I am told that many conversations between Trump loyalists and his critics come to an abrupt, screeching halt by the complaint that critics don't respect the President. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán says that any attack on his policies is a sign of disrespect for Hungary. The Turkish writer, Ece Temelkuran, drew attention to similar demands by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. When charged with rigging the polls, Mr. Erdogan claimed that this showed disrespect to the people of Turkey and their choice.

The hierarchical notion of respect is a one-way street and incompatible with the very idea of democracy. The egalitarian notion of respect articulated by Kant, a perfect riposte to respect as deference, is presupposed by democracies and relevant as a value in relationships among citizens but is too general to be of use in the specific context of citizen-ruler relationship.

Does this mean then that respect for politicians is entirely dispensable in democracies? I don't think so.

## Evaluative respect

Another kind of respect exists: this is owed to people not because of what they are or their social position but by virtue of what they have achieved. This may manifest in some praiseworthy qualities of character such as moral integrity or by perfecting some skills as a cricketer or scholar. This respect consists in an attitude of positive appraisal of the person's moral qualities or non-moral skills. Here respect is not presumed but earned. We can appropriately say that this attitude of respect is deserved when a person meets some standards of excellence integral to that practice. Precisely because it is something one achieves, it can also be a matter of degree. Rightly or wrongly, one can say that one has greater respect for Sunil Gavaskar than, say, Chetan Chauhan, or Jawaharlal Nehru than, say, Govind Ballabh Pant.

It is this notion of 'evaluative respect' or 'appraisal respect' that is relevant in democratic politics. Politicians occupy a contingent political position where they have a job to perform: work for the common good; ensure that everyone is treated as an equal, not suffer from negative discrimination at the hands of the government; get what the people need; ensure that there is peace and justice. Also, that they work truthfully, sincerely, transparently. When politicians achieve these goals and behave in accordance with the highest standards of political morality, they earn our respect. When they fail to do so, we begin to disrespect them.

There is no question of hierarchical respect or deference to our leaders in modern, democratic polities. It is our right to question, challenge and criticise our politicians. All power wielders, including the Prime Minister, must submit to these demands. All of us, the rulers and the ruled, are bound by norms of egalitarian respect more generally, and by evaluative respect specific to democratic politics in particular. To our politicians, we can only say: perform well, and earn our respect!

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# A lot to say, but little to offer

The current nationalist hysteria does not enable the voter to make her choice in tranquility



SWAMI AGNIVESH

Elections are an opportunity for people to express their will. In healthy situations, electioneering is undertaken with sensitivity to a people's welfare. When public life becomes pathological, electioneering becomes indifferent to lived realities. People allow themselves to be bewitched by rhetorical demagoguery. Instead of choosing what is good for them, people punish persons and parties they are made to dislike.

The will of a people is that their real-life needs must be addressed. It is that governance should become a medium through which welfare is enhanced. If this is the case, electioneering will focus on the issues that concern the people. Good governance is its by-product. Governance stands rooted in freedom and justice for all. Good governance is not a matter of growth-related statistics or muscle flexing against political rivals.

The essence of freedom in a democracy is that citizens are able to exercise their right to choose in an informed fashion. It is to this end that electioneering and exercising one's franchise need to be 'free and fair'. Political parties which try to vitiate electioneering with extraneous factors so as to determine how citizens exercise their franchise can have no interest in providing good governance. That they feel obliged to resort to such strategies is tantamount to a confession that they have failed in providing good governance.

## Nationalistic hysteria

Consider, for example, the promise of development that dominated electioneering in 2014 ('*achhe din*'). But this promise does not figure at all in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's electioneering this time. Instead, he is busy whipping up 'national security' hysteria. The need to tom-tom 'national security' arises only because of an aggravation of insecurity. Admittedly, national security has deteriorated under Mr. Modi's watch, through terrorism and cross-border hostilities.

The strange thing is that this distressing sign of the failure of governance is being used to whip up nationalistic hysteria to prevent factual and rational thinking. This undermines the capacity of citizens to make rational choices conducive to their welfare. The purpose of jingoistic propaganda is to ensure that people do not express their will

through franchise, but vote according to the will of somebody else. No election conducted amid mass hysteria can be 'free or fair'. The Election Commission is in denial of realities, even if it maintains otherwise. The prescription that electioneering shall stop 48 hours before voting takes place is meant to provide voters the serenity to think for themselves in a calm and collected fashion. But thinking does not take place in a vacuum; it is substantially influenced by what a person has been exposed to in the immediate past. It is naïve to assume that the potent effect of jingoistic propaganda will wear off in two days. Propaganda of this kind affords the party in power a huge advantage over its rivals. All the more so given the support it enjoys of a partisan media, augmented by an army of social media warriors who enjoy freedom to distort information.

Even this would not have proved so lethal, but for the disarray among the Opposition parties, which seem to not know who to fight. Much of the impact of Mr. Modi's speeches stems from the Opposition's immaturity and irresponsibility. As of now, these parties seem to lack vision and consistency. When a voter, as yet unsettled by pro-Modi propaganda, weighs her options before deciding who to vote for, she is likely to wonder if there is a viable alternative to endorse.

## An irresponsible campaign

Elections must be fought on real-life issues. To fight is to stay focused. The outcome of staying focused is that the public are educated on the ground realities vis-à-vis the issues that concern them. Only within such a framework can alternatives be identified.

Instead, the energy in the present electioneering has gone into generating waves of mutual acrimony. The alleged inferiority of Opposition parties does not alleviate the deprivations of the people. The sole point on which the present electioneering is strategised is that people have no alternative other than oneself. Parties vie with each other in proving that all are vile and unworthy. Neither formation offers anything convincingly positive to decide rationally which way to turn.

But this one thing I know: the Modi show is based on violence and malevolence – linguistic, sentimental, ideological and communal. His idea of patriotism is no more than hostility towards Pakistan. But time will prove that reducing the outcome of the world's largest democratic franchise to settling scores with a neighbouring country, in utter indifference to pan-Indian lived realities, is at once idiotic and irresponsible.

Swami Agnivesh is a social activist

## SINGLE FILE

### The road to Kashmir

Respecting human rights is not at odds with providing security, but an essential component of it

MEENAKSHI GANGULY



After authorities declared that the highway linking Udhampur in Jammu to Baramulla in Kashmir will be closed to civilians for two days every week until May 31, Jammu and Kashmir residents reported extreme hardship in transporting products and

getting services, including critical health care. In a letter to the Home Minister, 26 members of civil society and retired public officials, many of whom have been associated with Jammu and Kashmir, warned that the decision "undercuts our democratic credentials and attracts the charge of military rule". Many blamed the government's approach towards the Kashmir insurgency and towards Pakistani support for armed groups – an approach that both admirers and critics have described as "muscular".

Armed attacks and human rights violations have soared in Kashmir in recent years. The violence has taken a heavy toll on security personnel and civilians. Over 800 alleged militants have also been killed in the last five years, and security experts have reported increased recruitment of young Kashmiris by armed groups. There are allegations that security forces use excessive force to quell protests, causing serious injuries including permanent blindness. Hundreds have been held under the draconian Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, which permits up to two years in preventive detention. Kashmiris also complain about rude treatment by security forces during search operations.

The "muscular" approach may also have encouraged a culture of collective punishment against Kashmir's Muslim citizens. On social media, admirers of the ruling party no longer distinguish between protesters armed with stones and militants armed with guns – they are all called terrorists. Kashmiri students, traders and street vendors in various cities across India have been threatened in mob attacks. In a shocking case of communal hate, following the rape and murder of a Muslim child in Kathua, a hard-line Hindutva group publicly supported the accused.

Kashmiris have expressed concern that the restrictions on civilian use of the highway is another form of collective punishment because of the attack in Pulwama in February. The State Human Rights Commission noted that "schoolchildren, medical patients, government and private employees, as well as other civilians, will not be able to reach their destinations well in time." Under international law, measures such as closing a crucial highway that undermine fundamental rights to movement, food and health must be narrowly tailored and proportionate to a legitimate governmental aim. While the authorities have a responsibility to provide security, they need to recognise that respecting human rights is not at odds with providing security, but an essential component of it. What should occur is a muscular approach to minimise the hardships Kashmiris face and ensure that protecting their fundamental rights is a priority.

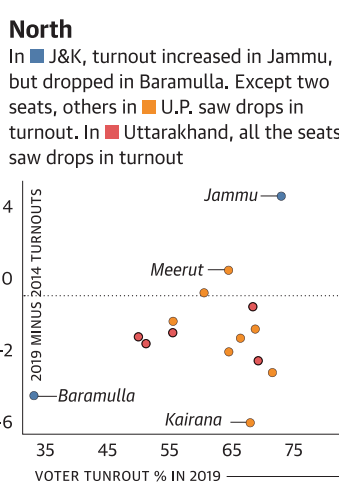
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## DATA POINT

### A marginally lower turnout

Voter turnout in a majority (58%) of the 91 seats in the first phase of this general election was lower than in 2014, according to provisional data released by the Election Commission. The overall turnout in these seats was 69.43%, compared to 70.8% in 2014. The graphs capture variations in turnout across regions. Each circle denotes a seat. Seats above the horizontal zero line registered a better turnout in 2019 compared to 2014. By The Hindu Data Team



## FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 16, 1969

### Constitution Bill on Assam passed

The Lok Sabha to-day [April 15, New Delhi] passed with an overwhelming majority of 369 votes to 28 the Constitution (22nd Amendment) Bill to enable the formation of an autonomous State for the hill districts of Assam. The Union Home Minister, Mr. Y.B. Chavan, who piloted the measure, firmly ruled out the possibility of extending a similar arrangement to Telengana or to any other region in the country. "Assam is a separate case, because already autonomous hill districts exist under the Constitution," he said. "It is wrong," he said, "to draw a parallel between Assam and Telengana. The question of Telengana is different. It has a different connotation. We have to consider the Telengana problem in the Telengana way." Conceding a demand for autonomous States within States would be the beginning of the disintegration of the country, Mr. Chavan said. There was record attendance in the House and the Congress Party took every precaution to see that its members were present at the time of voting in almost full strength.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 16, 1919.

### German Missionaries.

In the Commons [in London] replying to Mr. Hailwood who alleged that great harm was being done to British interests in India and Far East by the seditious efforts of German Missionaries, and who asked if they were specially exempted from deportation, Mr. Harmsworth referred to Mr. [Secretary of State for India] Montagu's answer of July 1st. So far as India was concerned since then the situation had not changed in any way. Government was aware of the political activities in Far East of certain German Missionaries, but it was open to doubt whether British interests were greatly harmed thereby. The question of exemption from repatriation of German missionaries in China was being considered. His Majesty's Minister at Peking had been instructed to expedite repatriation of those whose attitude rendered them obnoxious during the war.

## POLL CALL

### Booth capturing

Booth capturing is an electoral fraud whereby supporters of a political party "capture" a polling booth and vote in place of the registered voters there in order to ensure that their candidate wins. The first recorded instance of booth capturing took place in the 1957 Bihar Assembly election; in later elections more rampant booth capturing was reported across the country. Under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, booth capturing was made punishable by law. On the ground of booth capturing, a poll can be adjourned or countermanded. Electronic Voting Machines were introduced in India in place of the paper ballot to, among other things, prevent this malpractice.

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