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## Proportional Representation Electoral System A Stepping Stone in the Furthering of Indian Democracy

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### ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to present some comparative benefits of a proportional representation voting system of democratic selection of representatives vis-à-vis the present system of voting in India characterized by the term First Past the Post System (FPTPS). Authors argue that a proportional representation system would not only result in a more participatory democracy, it will also help doing away with some of the anomalies that exist in the present system.

**Keywords;** *Indian voting system, general elections, FPTPS, proportional representation system, Indian democracy*

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### **Introduction**

India recently went through the General Elections set for the 16th Lok Sabha of the Indian Parliament. A recurring theme of media coverage and the so-called mainstream public opinion pertains to the so-called failure of the 'Indian political class'—what with rampant criminalization, blatant violation of principles, lack of accountability and so on. Though a part of this discourse reflects the objective needs of imperialism to undermine the still nascent democratic set up in India there is also substantive 'internal' aspect to it. Capitalist development (hemmed in simultaneously by imperialism and pre-capitalist structures) as it is increasingly unable to meet the aspirations of the Indian people is giving rise to a complex process of degeneration of existing social structures and values (of which the rise of the right

wing Hindutva movement of the Sangh Parivar is a potent example) while at the same time implicitly opening up the possibility of a democratic upsurge along radical lines (Kovacs, 2007; Iliaiah, 2001; Desai, 2011; Ruparelia, 2011).

While it would be naïve in the extreme to attribute the present malaise exclusively or principally to those social institutions that govern social decision-making, the catalytic effect of the relevant institutions especially its ability to accelerate social change in either direction cannot be overlooked. One such key institution is the electoral system, which is followed in India—the first past the post system (FPTPS). A review of contemporary literature provides a broad understanding of different voting systems in different parts of world (Smith & Banks, June 1991; Drogus,



2008; Felsenthal, 2010; Arrow, 1963; Balinski & Laraki, 2011; Colomer, 2004).

Consider the following example: let us assume that the total number of members of parliament (MPs) is 540. For electoral purposes the country is reorganised into 540 constituencies. Each of the latter will have one or more candidates. The candidate who secures the highest number of votes in that constituency is declared the victor. Now that party or coalition of parties that secures the support of 271 or more MPs will go ahead and form the government.

### **Limitations of the Current Electoral System in India**

The limitations of FPTPS are well known. Let us enumerate some of them:

1. It is possible that in a constituency that the victor secures less than 50 per cent of the votes. For example if there are three candidates A, B and C and they have secured 45 per cent, 40 per cent and 15 per cent of the vote respectively then candidate A is declared victorious. However A who has been rejected by 55 per cent (which is the combined vote share of B and C) of the voters has still managed to get elected.

2. The same problem assumes more serious proportions in the case of parties. Let us assume that there are three principal parties X, Y and Z who have secured 40 per cent, 35 per cent and 15 per cent of the votes respectively but the seats that they have secured are 320, 200 and 20 respectively. Small parties secure the residual 10 per cent of the votes. These figures are not merely hypothetical—often the difference of a few per cent of votes will result in landslide majorities under FPTPS. In the extreme case of the same voting pattern being reflected in each and every constituency, party X will secure all of the 540 seats while Y and Z will not have even a single MP though their combined vote share of 50 per cent (35+15) substantially exceeds that of X (40 per cent).

Not only is the FPTPS fundamentally undemocratic it also militates against fledgling political parties, which may have substantial but dispersed mass bases. The latter is often the principal electoral manifestation of democratic upsurges. The ability of FPTPS to somewhat subdue mass democratic upsurges in the electoral arena is therefore obvious. It compels many of these parties to focus on intensive constituency based planning involving getting all the

non-class based social equations (caste, religion, nationality etc.) right and so on. Though it is not the exclusive mechanism of co-opting new political forces into the so-called mainstream its enabling role is clearly not to be brushed aside.

The system of proportional representation (PR) is a well-known alternative to FPTPS. Each party puts forward a list of candidates where the total number of candidates in each list will be ordinarily 540. It involves the allocation of MPs to each party in proportion to the total votes it has obtained in the country as a whole. In order to see how the PR system works let us rework the numerical example involving parties X, Y and Z. Let us assume that there are in all six parties U, V, W, X, Y and Z. The following illustrative table summarises the relevant information.

Here, the vote share has been translated into seats under the PR system as follows. It is decreed that all those parties that are unable to secure less than 5 per cent of the votes do not qualify for seats. The combined share of votes obtained by those parties who fail to figure above the 'cut off' of 5 per cent (i.e. the total combined vote share of U, V and W) is 10 per cent. The three parties who are above the cut off are X, Y and Z. and their combined vote share is 90 per cent. Their seats are calculated as follows: [(per cent of votes secured)/(combined vote share)] x 540. The number of seats that will be allocated to each of the parties is denoted in column three.

Clearly, the outcome under the PR system is more representative of the voting patterns of the people. Parties Y and Z who have secured a combined vote share of 50 per cent have been allotted a total of 300 seats i.e. 55 per cent of the seats under the PR system while under FPTPS they would have together secured a total of 220 seats which is 40 per cent of the seats. In case the combined vote share of those parties that have failed to make the 'cut off' is substantial then the 'cut off' should be reduced and vice versa.

### **Advantages of the Proportional Representation Electoral System**

The advantages of the system of PR are as follows:

1. The problem of reservation of one third of the seats for women candidates now admits of a straightforward solution. Each party when it decides upon its list will have to allot one third of the seats to women. If for instance party T is allotted 100 seats on the basis of its votes secured then the first 67

candidates in its list will be declared elected as MPs. The remaining 33 seats will be allotted only to women candidates in the list of party T. The same process will have to be followed by all parties. There of course exists the possibility that many parties may fail to allow any women to figure in the first two thirds of their lists and thus the total number women MPs may never exceed one third of the total. In that case they would be open to critical public scrutiny since the standard excuse of ‘winnability’ would no longer hold good. An analogous exercise could be undertaken for reservation of seats for Dalits and Other Backward Castes.

2. The current system of ‘tactical voting’ will also become unnecessary. For example a voter in Gujarat who wishes to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the FPTPS today will probably have no choice but to vote for a candidate of the Indian National Congress (Indira) even if s/he does not endorse many of the policies of the latter.

3. Constituency wise fine-tuning of non-class based social equations will also become obsolete though the persistence of these considerations at the all India level are bound to persist but they will have to take different forms. Moreover the scope for outright criminal elements to attain national prominence will also be somewhat undermined—the former would have to fully integrate with the so-called mainstream to retain their social prowess—a process that is currently somewhat opaque.

The system of PR will also cause the demise of the Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) since MPs will no longer ‘represent’ a particular constituency. This will probably be for the better since the MPLADS is currently working to undermine democratic decentralization. The funds that are currently allotted to the MPLADS are best reallocated to the relevant local bodies.

In conclusion it must re-emphasized that the system of voting cannot by itself provide the answers to the pressing problems of social change. In fact they only play a catalytic role that will prove to be crucial. The system of PR will act as a bulwark against the attenuation of democracy that is part and parcel of the offensive of imperialist globalization—where possible get an executive presidential system instituted and ensure that the victory of the ‘pro-reform’ candidate which would allow unfettered practice of neoliberal policies. When this is not possible try to get a two party system instituted and

ensure that the two mainstream parties ‘evolve’ a consensus on crucial issues of national importance that ‘ought to be above political considerations’ which is the usual *nom de guerre* for neoliberal policies in Third World countries. The system of PR by allowing the people to both articulate their plurality in terms of specific concerns and creating the possibility for a more enduring unity based on an alternative to the hegemony of neoliberalism will promote democratic upsurges—in fact it’s very institution can only be possible on the basis of a sustained carrying forward of radical possibilities latent in India’s democratic system.

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**Tables Used**

**Table-1: Comparison between Proportional Voting and First Past the Post System**

Party	Vote Percent	Seats under PR system	Seats under FPTPS	Difference between PR system and FPTPS
U	3	0	0	0
V	4	0	0	0
W	3	0	0	0
X	40	$240 = \{540 \times [40/90]\}$	320	-80
Y	35	$210 = \{540 \times [35/90]\}$	200	10
Z	15	$90 = \{540 \times [15/90]\}$	20	70
Total	100	540	540	0

Note: Hypothetical example by the authors

**Table-2: List of Countries with Proportional Voting system as on 2012**

Country	Type
Albania	Party list
Algeria	Party list
Angola	Party list
Australia	For Senate only, Single Transferable Vote
Austria	Party list, 4% threshold
Argentina	Party list
Aruba	Party list
Belgium	Party list
Bolivia	Mixed member proportional
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Party list
Brazil	Party list
Bulgaria	Party list, 4% threshold
Burkina Faso	Party list
Burundi	Party list
Cambodia	Party list
Cape Verde	Party list
Colombia	Party list
Costa Rica	Party list
Croatia	Party list, 5% threshold

Curaçao	Party list
Cyprus	Party list
Czech Republic	Party list, 5% threshold
Dem. Rep. of the Congo	Mixed member proportional
Denmark	Party list
Dominican Republic	Party list
Equatorial Guinea	Party list
Estonia	Party list, 5% threshold
Finland	Party list
Germany	Mixed member proportional, 5% (or 3 district winners) threshold
Guinea-Bissau	Party list
Guyana	Party list
Hong Kong	Party list
Hungary	Mixed member proportional
Iceland	Party list
India	For Upper House (Rajya Sabha) only
Indonesia	Party list
Iraq	Party list
Ireland	Single Transferable Vote (For Dáil only)
Israel	Party list, 2% threshold
Japan	Mixed member proportional
Latvia	Party list, 5% threshold
Lesotho	Mixed member proportional
Liberia	Party list
Liechtenstein	Party list, 8% threshold
Luxembourg	Party list
Malta	Single Transferable Vote
Mexico	Mixed member proportional
Moldova	Party list
Montenegro[2]	Party list
Morocco	Party list, 6% threshold
Namibia	Party list
Nepal	Party list
Netherlands	Party list
New Caledonia	Party list
New Zealand	Mixed member proportional, 5% threshold
Nicaragua	Party list
Northern Ireland	Single Transferable Vote
Norway	Party list
Paraguay	Party list

Peru	Party list
Poland	Party list, 5% threshold
Portugal	Party list
Romania	Mixed member proportional, 5% threshold
Russia	Party list
San Marino	Party list
Sao Tome and Principe	Party list
Serbia	Party list
Sint Maarten	Party list
Slovakia	Party list, 5% threshold
Slovenia	Party list, 4% threshold
South Africa	Party list
South Korea	Mixed member proportional, 3% (or 5 district winners) threshold
Spain	Party list, 3% threshold in small constituencies
Sri Lanka	Party list
Suriname	Party list
Sweden	Party list, 4% threshold
Switzerland	Party list
Taiwan	Mixed member proportional
Thailand	Mixed member proportional
Tunisia	Party list
Turkey	Party list, 10% threshold
Uruguay	Party list
Venezuela	Mixed member proportional
Wallis and Futuna	Party list

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