

## Let us strengthen democracy together

By Arti M. Grover

Often during the way to my office, I ask my cab driver to switch off the FM radio. The reason is because I was overwhelmed with the party *prachar* (advertisement) airing so frequently. These ads are hell-bent on convincing listeners to choose one thing over the other. Certain ad phrases stuck in my mind—so the PR agencies are doing a good job. On the other hand, valid messages from the Election Commission were encouraging voters to vote. These messages were not being aired for the first time, but I took them more seriously this time. Why? Because at community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat, an initiative of Sehgal Foundation, we are part of an initiative called the Festival of Democracy.<sup>1</sup> We call it *Votan Ka Tyohaar* (festival of voting).

Just as festival preparations began, practitioners from community radios attended an intensive three-day workshop at University of Hyderabad aimed to build their capacities on the electoral provisions and new initiatives taken by the Election Commission for voters, especially for old-age, physically disabled voters, and other such provisions. These members of a close-knit radio family have diverse backgrounds, each having their own set of strengths and challenges. They pitched in with their ideas for getting the message across to the communities. Then back at home, each of the practitioners were at the helm, devising elaborate episode plans with their teams. The celebrations also came with the responsibility to remain nonpartisan and nonpolitical.

### A well-made beginning

Fifty radio producers from twenty-five radio stations in sixteen states produced content in ten languages, exemplifying participation as the key to good governance. Participation also leads to more accountable and responsive authorities. The voter education initiative under the Festival of Democracy provided for the creation of radio programs on common themes such as democracy and the value of voting, informed and ethical voting, participation of marginalized sections, and the actual procedures and processes of voting.

*Mehandi* and *rangoli* patterns were created on the theme of voting, along with rallies, group meetings, signature campaigns, and many more efforts with the aim that voters listen in and participate in the festival and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The voter education initiative in urban centers inspired young people to post “selfie” pictures showing inked fingers with a caption. This was seen in rural areas as well. But there is more to just exercising the power to vote; informed and

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<sup>1</sup> The Festival of Democracy is a partnership between UNESCO Chair on Community Media at University of Hyderabad and Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) program of the Election Commission that invited community radio stations to build awareness around the constitutional provision of Right to Vote and the importance it has in a large democracy, in India’s case, the world’s biggest democracy.

ethical voting is what any vibrant democracy strives for. Now is the time to question whether we are on the right track.

### **Sharing the celebrations**

Upholding transparency, an ethos of democracy, each community radio station had an account on the project management portal (<http://mis.cmarch.in/>) designed for the project that served as a repository of content created by each station. This enabled the stations to login to the portal from the Home page and upload documents, audio files, photographs, etc., into assigned folders.

### **Practitioner speaks**

The Alfaz-e-Mewat team made twelve episodes on different topics, aired songs and jingles on voter education, engaged with communities, and interviewed the election commission officials at the district level to share relevant information.

Fakat Hussain, a community broadcaster who participated in the capacity building workshop and produced the content, shared, "*Hume ek nagrik ka mooly to pata tha par is tarah se radio ke madhyam se loktantra mein nagrik bhaagidari ko badava dene aur voter saksharta par kaam karne ka mauka pehli baar mili. Hume loktantra ke maha tyohaar mein bad chadkar hissa lena hai.*" (We knew the value of a citizen but working for enhancing citizen participation in a democracy and voter education through community radio is a welcome initiative. We should wholeheartedly participate in the festival of democracy.)

The initiatives taken by the Election Commission for voter education showed inclusion across all levels. India votes—and does so for a reason!

In the season of elections

There are actions and reactions

Wooing voters, charming them

Election speeches have no end

Voters have to come out

Cast their vote and say aloud

Our country . . .

A living example of democracy

Above cast, creed, and gender.

Let us together strengthen it.

*(Arti M. Grover is program leader, Communications at S M Sehgal Foundation)*