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## **Democracy, Trust & Universal Design**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores Universal Design in the context of the Indian Election, often termed as a festival of democracy. The study derives its understanding from a student design project (4) and discovers that Universal Design must embrace 'Trust' as an important principle. Large-scale public services more often than not overlook the importance of trust in designing the delivery mechanisms.*

### **Keywords**

*Principles, Universal Design, Trust, Democracy*

One of the most seminal definitions of Democracy was given by Abraham Lincoln. He said, "Democracy is a rule of the people, for the people and by the people".

This definition has been detailed further.

Democracy is a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections.

Democracy is a political system that allows active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life.

Democracy is a political system that protects the human rights of all citizens.

Democracy is a political system that supports a rule of law, in which the laws and procedures are created with the consensus of the people for all citizens.

## **People, protocols, procedures, and institutions**

**Resources of nations become available to all for their development**

**Resources are fellow people, protocols, procedures, institutions materials, energy, knowledge, income, benefits.**

**In a democracy, there is competition for power. People are the arbitrator. They cast their preference. Their preference is governed by their perception and experience. Manipulation of perception & experience becomes the driving force that will decide the direction in which the scales will tilt. Perceptions are moulded through enticement, freebees, and social polarization. My man, their man, our man. Governments rush to announce policies before the elections are announced. Enticements are offered as the elections draw nearer.**

**Parties cultivate their 'vote banks'. They ensure that members of their vote bank are very much there in the 'electoral rolls' and have no difficulty in casting when they arrive at the polling booth on the day of the elections. In the absence of any proactive initiative by the Election Commission of India, the process of registering eligible voters remain partisan. The Election commission has no pro-active mechanisms to register a voter. Either the individual has to register as a voter or political parties help them out in the process of registering. Election Commission does not say, look you are a PAN Card Holder, you are paying taxes, you are paying electricity, water, or property taxes, you have been receiving letters on this address. The police station records say you live at this address. Here is your Voters Identity Card.**

**By God's grace, if one has a voter's ID and on the election day one goes to the election booth to cast your vote, you may be turned away either because your name is not in the electoral rolls compiled specifically for a scheduled election.**

**A voter may cross this hurdle, their name is there in the electoral rolls but they are unable to prove their identity and may not be allowed to exercise their franchise.**

**Lucky are those who can enter the polling station. Their finger has been marked with indelible ink. One is all set to vote. One casts the vote. There is still doubt if the vote cast will be counted in favor of the candidate one has voted for. Electronic Voting Machine has often been a subject of doubt. Supreme Court of India recommended a verification system. Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT). It is said that the voter can verify through a window, a paper copy of the vote that they have cast. Doubts here have also been raised, but to raise doubts could lead to penal action. It was also proposed that VVPAT results and EVM results will be tallied. However, this has been implemented on a very limited scale. The reason given is that it will delay the results by 5 days. Is a 5-day delay not acceptable if it removes doubts and establishes the integrity of the Electronic Voting Machine and the rightful election of the winning candidate.**

**Then comes the final day of counting when results from all the EVM are compiled together. Doubts have been often been raised of fairness in the compiling process. Often there are complaints of hustling the compilation. Doubts are looked down upon.**

**Entertaining doubts, addressing doubts, checking, rechecking is essential to establishing truth and integrity. Only when doubts are addressed & truth and integrity are established than trust emerges. Trust is the bedrock foundation of democracy. But this bedrock cannot be an a priori assumption. It has to be cultivated.**

## **Overcoming Trust Deficit**

**Trust according to the Oxford dictionary is defined as**

**Firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something.**

**Amit Khanna(1) has written a beautiful essay on trust deficit.**

**Quest for power is an important flavor of politics. Service to the people can often become secondary. Trust becomes a victim of it. Extensive use of technology in the execution of procedures & decisions is often assumed to be more trustworthy. But this is a fallacy and the common man can become a victim of the power-mongering political parties, self-styled hackers & crypto-criminals. One would have hoped better communication and access to information will instill confidence and respect in society but this often has added fuel to the fire of distrust. Such distrust shaped the events of the epic age Mahabharata, and other empires in the history of mankind, and it continues to date. All global leaders & political parties are its victims and many even thrive on it. We see it play out everywhere, in all democracies, from the US to India. Not only do politicians mistrust each other but citizens have little trust in them, irrespective of their political affiliation. Despite continuous effort which politicians, governments, and leaders put in through propaganda and media, the gulf between them and the people is only widening. As far as governance is concerned, almost all institutions are under suspicion. Bureaucracy, police, tax**

departments, municipalities, and even the judiciary are not trusted. Every action is sought to be enquired and even then, there is a constant demand for further probes. It's now one long winding roller coaster ride of distrust.

In the context of elections, the Election Commission's role goes much beyond conducting free & fair elections. The Election Commission is an interface between the people and the government. They are responsible for the trust people have in democracy and the government. It is important that the processes that the Election Commission adopts are transparent and allows checks and rechecks. Only then the Election Commission can be the bedrock of democracy. Only then do they generate trust in the results thrown up by the election. Only they can ensure that democracy is trusted. The election system should be simple enough to be understood & trusted by all eligible to vote. Too much technology is not understood by anyone & the voters are pushed by an authority to trust it.

All personal relationships, trade, and commerce, politics, society, everything are based on trust. Trust is the cornerstone of human civilization. Trust is vital to any transaction. Without trust, there can be no relationship, institution, or nation.

Trust is the core of all core values. It is important for nations, institutions, organizations, social groups, people, environment, systems, services & products. Without trust, there can be no synergy, no symbiotic dependable growth.

Trust has to be cultivated by being open to sceptics, by entertaining doubts, by consciously allowing checks and rechecks.

**Trust should be at the core of all processes, plans, and designs. It should form the core of design, design for all, barrier-free design & Universal Design**

## **Universal Design in Democracy**

**The focus of Universal Design till now has been towards the design of products & services operated by business entities. The objective was merely to facilitate usage by a diverse population. Universalization was limited in demographic reach. At best extending to a city. Universal Design has not ventured to address challenges like the universal franchise, universal education, universal health. These are design challenges that will help evolve Universal Design to a level that will justify its universality.**

**The principles articulated for Universal Design are**

***Equitable Use***

***Flexibility in Use***

***Simple and Intuitive Use***

***Perceptible Information***

***Tolerance for Error***

***Low Physical Effort***

***Size and Space for Approach and Use***

**All these factors are extremely important for addressing systems for universal franchise, universal education, universal health, and other services like public transport networks, revenue collection, tourism, and hotels. However, it is not enough. Long-term happy acceptance of the design solution requires that it evokes and supports trust.**

**We must add 'trust' as one of the Principles of Universal Design.**

## **Designing Trust**

**We live within interdependent systems. Elements within the system, network and depend on each other. Reliability of interaction is essential for the functioning of the system. There are well-thought-out strategies to achieve reliability in non-living and living elements of the system.**

**Non-living systems can be made reliable by**

***Enhancing durability of components & connections***

***Enhancing the reliability of power source***

***Providing for redundancy***

***Providing backup***

***Transparency***

***Pro-actively searching for defects, hiring / rewarding ethical hackers***

**Living systems are made reliable by**

***Improving communication & understanding***

***Listening, valuing & appreciating users' complaints & suggestions***

***Responding, transparency***

***Allowing improvement***

***Being self-critical***

***Absence of fear, coercion & threat***

## **Universal Design & Indian Elections**

**Indian election, often termed as a festival of democracy, was taken up as an exercise in Universal Design at the Department of Design at the Delhi Technological University, Delhi. (2)**

**The findings regarding trust deficit were astounding. Possibilities are immense. We will be sharing more details in subsequent issues.**

**Hope Universal Design researchers will venture into investigating similar challenges in their countries.**

**If Universal Design investigates government initiatives in health care, education, revenue collection, tourism then not only will Universal Design Principles & methodology evolve but also the world will be a better place.**

## References

**1) Amit Khanna, Trust Deficit,**

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