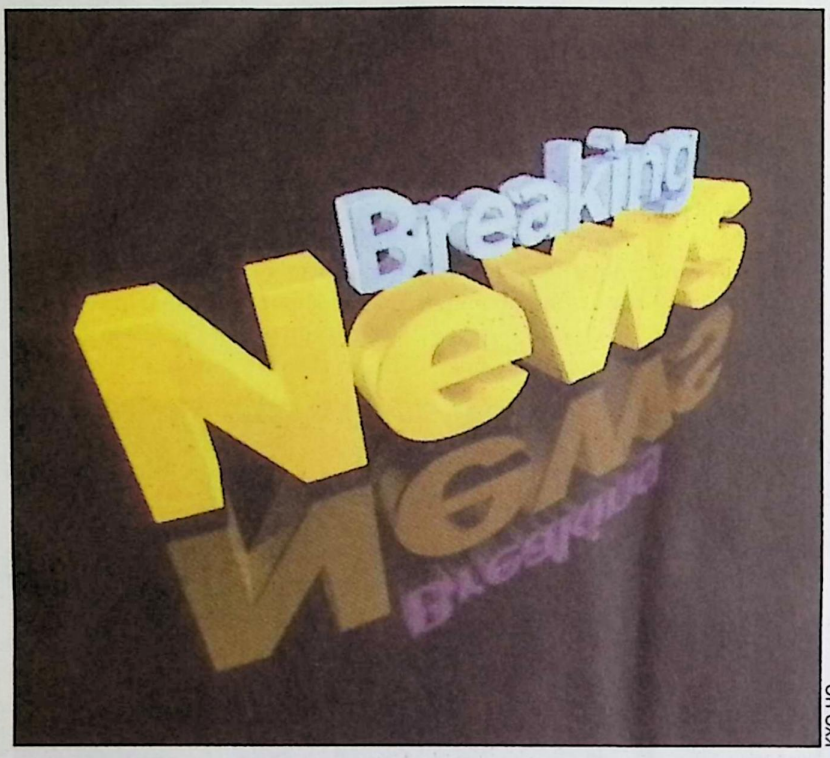


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vote accordingly. You knew who your choices were, you gathered the information necessary to compare between them and then you chose the person you want to represent you. Without much effort at all really, you have just negated for yourself one of the imperfections of democracy in developing countries: The choices people make are not always informed.

There are various reasons for this, and some are even acceptable and prevalent in mature democracies. For example, a person may not care to know. He or she has every right to turn up at the voting booth on Election Day with the weather that morning as the deciding factor. Another may not have the mental capacity to discern between a murderer and a saint, but that can never be reason enough to discount his or her vote. And then, of course, there are the bigots and the bases, who will happily vote for the devil as long as he is disguised in their party's colours.

What is unacceptable is when perfectly straight-thinking individuals – who would vote differently if they only knew better – enter their booths and are presented with a list of names they know next-to-nothing about from independent sources. They took an interest in the elections; they would have liked to know more. Some have attended a few rallies on their way home from a hard day's work in the field and heard promises of schools and bridges. Some have asked probing questions when visited by campaigners, and learned everything but the truth. Some, valuing independent opinion, have gone to the village elders. They have returned even more confused, not only about the upcoming election, but also about 1971.

Bereft of the access to information we have, they cannot be said to have chosen. Rather, a choice has been imposed on them, or at best, they have somehow arrived at one. Unless unusually perceptive, the kind to tell a man to be trusted from the look in his eyes is usually misinformed. One wonders what portion of our over-8 crore registered voters may fall in this tragic category on the 28th. Quite a chunk, probably, given our large rural population. And they are not at all absent from our urban centres either.

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While they are the ones who are usually more resilient, we are, more importantly than literate, informed. We have access to information, and the various mediums through which it is disseminated. The internet, newspapers, television, radio, even mobile phones are all sources of information these days and the typical reader of this magazine would have access to most, if not all of them. If nothing else, this election represents an opportunity for us to utilise this access we have to complement our resilient men and women who plough the fields and sow the seeds that feed us so that collectively, we can at least arrive at a decision that is informed.

Mind you, we haven't made the choice yet. In all honesty, during the last elections in 2001, the scenario was very different. Seven years on, penetration is still relatively low, but back then, there weren't as many Bangla channels on television or radio, internet meant dial-up, and the number of mobile phone users was exponentially lower. The print media, which always maintained a presence anyway, has also upped the pace of its progress. All of it combined has resulted in a certain