

From Subject to Citizen

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The rise of individualism in the history of man and society is recent. In Europe, it commences with the scientific revolution and the beginning of capitalism. It was opposed by the old order of religion, monarch, guild, tribe and language.

It gained legitimacy and strength with the Protestant Reformation in Europe, the American Revolution and, finally, in the French Revolution, it found political expression in the “Rights of Man” and a State founded on “liberty, equality and fraternity”. The world has never been the same since.

The primacy of the individual, as opposed to the group-based assertion of rights and claims, defined the First Republic of India. The Constitutional concession to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was seen as an exceptional deviation from this rule and was expected to last only for a decade by which time those groups were expected to reach the same level as the rest of the population.

The Constitution established a secular State and aimed at achieving a secular society. But as the example of England shows, a secular society need not necessarily have a secular State. The State becomes de facto secular in secular society.

On the other hand, a de jure secular State need not give rise to a secular society unless it dedicates itself completely to the individual and his rights and freedom. To do so, a secular State should ensure that the individual has control over his own life and defend his rights.

A full identification of the individual with these traditional formations meant that the authority of the karta or clan chief, caste council and the priesthood, together with the dead hand of custom, overrode individual liberty and interests.

The individual tends to depend on the aggregate and not the aggregate on the individual. These aggregates existed, and continue to exist, because they serve a protective function, primarily for the group and its leaders and, only incidentally, for the individual.

While subjects are dominated by their group obligations and benefits, citizens are elevated by their individual rights and duties to the State and to each other. Citizens tend to be progressive in

their demands for greater liberty; subjects conservative in the defense of their traditions and group rights.

Subjects are obligated to their group for livelihoods, security and identity; citizens have their own capacity to achieve these fundamentals on their own so long as the State protects and sustains them.

In this movement towards a society of individuals exercising their free will as individuals, the First Republic was expected to play an active and effective role. It needed to substitute for the group in protecting its constituents' interests.

It should have treated such constituents as citizens rather than subjects - for as free and independent individuals they are no longer subject to anything other than the secular and uniform laws of the land. It should have overridden group interests and protected the individual. In turn, the individual would have defended the Republic.

In its 62 years, the First Republic has not achieved what was expected of it - in fact, it has aggravated the dependence of the individual on his jati, caste, religion, sect and language group. Worse, it has legitimized this tendency to the extent that most political parties are now aligned with these traditional formations for the sake of political support and electoral mobilization. The First Republic serves group interests and it has become an object of contest by warring groups and, in the process, it has become ineffective and will soon collapse under the strain.

In order to transform subjects into citizens, a Second Republic will be required. To succeed, this needs, above all, a strong State dedicated to individual interest and manned by honest and efficient politicians and officials.

It also needs to convincingly demonstrate that an individual does not need the support of his traditional group to defend his rights and achieve his ambitions. The Second Republic will have to act impersonally and without regard to social, religious and other statuses. It should be able to provide all the facilities that every individual needs: security of life, liberty and property, education, health care and, above all, self-respect.

It is only then that the citizen will defend the State and uphold the Republic. While theoretically this transformation can be done under any political system, in our democratic system elections determine who administers the Republic. We, therefore, need an alert electorate that demands and gets respect from its elected representatives and is able to hold them to account.

Elections yield desired results only if the elected representatives and State officials are honest, capable, responsive and caring persons. As anyone now can see, the First Republic has permitted a debilitating corruption by politicians and officials both at the highest levels and at the base of the system.

This has delegitimized the State and brought disrepute and disgrace to the First Republic. In economic terms, the subsistence economy has been transformed into a capitalist one; the old linkages between man and man, group and group, based on exchange of goods and services, have

been dissolved. They have been replaced by an individual's dependence on markets – for goods, services, labor and money.

Though the sharp differences in individual incomes that it has created may be as bad as, or even worse than, that of the past, the resultant growth of the economy may have justified the transformation. Again, the isolation and defenselessness of the individual in relation to market forces reduces the freedom of the individual and gives more power for those who control markets.

The Second Republic must play a signal role in keeping markets free, open, honest and efficient. For if allowed, markets will control men and not men markets. These markets determine the health of the entire economy. It is only State intervention that can protect the individual and society from the impersonal forces that dominate markets.

The State must ensure that market forces do not disrupt the lives of its citizens. Currently the traditional exploitation of the old order has been replaced by the exploitation by politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen through rigged and controlled markets.

In political terms, once the subject leaves the protection of the group in search of full expression of his individual will, he needs to unite with other individuals in truly secular groups dedicated to secure and protect individual rights. This will place limits on the State which otherwise may tend to exercise arbitrary power over individuals.

The individual is always under threat whatever the society and political system he finds himself in! Eternal vigilance by the individual is the price of liberty, we were told - and this is right. Citizens need to be literate, educated and have a decent livelihood – it is only then that they are liberated from the need to depend on their traditional social and religious formations.

With that achieved, true Independence would come to our people and nation. In this respect also, the First Republic has failed to transform subjects into citizens.

It must be hoped that a Second Republic will address the failure of the First and achieve what our people truly deserve – individual freedom from fear and want and inculcate hope for the future. For, ultimately, man should be the measure of all things.

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