

A Second Indian Republic

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The current Indian State can do a little good for the people; but it does much damage. Almost all its structures are corrupt, exploitative and basically dysfunctional.

Central to the idea of “good governance” is the role of the State in providing it. The State is made up of a set of institutions and organizations, which are given specific powers and responsibilities over a country.

At one extreme, it is entirely autonomous of society; at the other, totally dependent on it. Most States are between these extremes, depending on historical factors and the social, political and economic development of the people.

The democratic process has been historically slow and gradual. The British one started with the Magna Carta (1215) and achieved its full development in the last century with women’s suffrage. Similarly, the United States began the process in 1776 and it was not completed till 1965 when the blacks were allowed to exercise effective franchise.

In countries, gender, age, property and tax-paying qualifications were imposed - first vigorously and then relaxed as the process took firmer root and popular demands grew, eventually achieving unqualified full adult franchise.

Despite dire warnings from Rajagopalachari and Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawarharlal Nehru bulldozed the Constituent Assembly (itself elected on a limited property-based franchise) to give India his greatest gift - totally free adult franchise to a largely illiterate and uneducated population of desperately poor people.

The idea that the mass of former British and Princely subjects could be made citizens overnight by an act of grace was an ambitious one. It could have only worked in the long run if we were to make the entire electorate literate, educated and economically secure – the characteristic of an able, strong and independent citizenry. We performed the act of grace without providing the wherewithal for a life of grace.

Today we see every caste, sub-caste, religious, linguistic and ethnic group jockeying for a share of political power that can be used and misused to give them access to the State and to be able to convert that access to money, jobs and status for themselves. Such pressures invaded not only the political parties but also the civil service, police and, finally, the armed forces.

The civil service, selected by merit largely from the upper and middle classes, was thrown open to classes that had no experience of exercising power and with downward adjustment of their exam entrance qualifications. Similarly, the armed forces were filled with people from classes who had no tradition of laying down their lives for an idea or a notion – which is the basic job description.

This tendency of subverting merit has invaded all institutions of the State, including educational institutions. Add to this, the rise of the State-supported businessman - mostly traders, politicians, real estate types and all kinds of brokers masquerading as industrialists – and we have made a witch's brew of the State system. Money has become the measure of all things, including the most sacred and ancient.

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The police don't maintain law and order; the courts don't provide justice; hospitals have become death camps; schools don't teach; and politicians and bureaucrats don't serve the State but themselves.

As for rural development and agricultural progress and the rest of the development activities, they are intended to develop the political and bureaucratic class and their hangers-on, who tend to be criminals, goondas or dalals. The writ of the State does not run too far and its own servants break its laws and rules with impunity.

The remedy lies first in concentrating on the sovereign functions of the State (national defense, law and order, civil and criminal justice) and the provision of public goods (public health, literacy and education).

These functions define the State, which if not performed or performed badly, indicate a failed or failing State. The economy is important only in as much as it allows people to make their livelihoods and enables the State to perform sovereign functions better.

Secondly, the fig leaf of democracy has been snatched by the criminalisation and corruption of elections, parties, electors and elected. Nearly half the constituencies are “disturbed”. To hold general elections we need a million armed men. Political parties do not hold proper internal elections and don't file income tax and electoral returns for which they should be de-recognized. Can an undemocratic party represent the people?

As long as politician's power and legitimacy rests on a pliable, bribable and ignorant electorate, we will not get rulers who will look beyond their immediate selfish interests. The present system is clearly unsustainable. One can envisage a Second Republic based on new electoral arrangements along with State funding of elections.

The Second Republic could be different in that the franchise could vary at different levels – retain full adult franchise at the panchayat level where funds and power should be concentrated;

a franchise restricted by literacy, education and jobs/property at the State Assembly and an even more restricted franchise for Parliament.

Thus the vast majority of the population will be able to exercise their vote and defend their vested interests in their own neighborhood while the more able will elect representatives to determine policies at the State level. At the Parliamentary level, the need for members with the ability to take a broad and longer view would require an enlightened electorate that is interested in those goals.

Most important of all, of course, is the need for very strict qualifications for candidates for elected office. State funding of political parties should be conditional and linked to registration of party members, inner party elections, and selection of candidates by constituency parties: all verified by the Election Commission.

The Comptroller and Auditor-General will naturally audit the expenditure. Democracy does not come cheap - someone, somewhere pays for it. It is better for the State to do so and ensure clean politics by vetting the process through constitutional bodies. If we have to preserve some of the democratic gains of the last sixty-five years, then a discontinuous change in the electoral system seems necessary.

All this may need a new Constitution. So be it.

There is no particular merit in hanging on to one that has undergone 100 odd Amendments since its promulgation. A simple straightforward piece of paper dealing with fundamentals, which can be understood by school children, is all that is required, not a hotchpotch of abstruse public policy ambitions, which are never going to be fulfilled.

If the political class embraces systemic change for “good governance”, it will be because there are no other options of protecting its own existence, liberty and property in this country. The sooner they reform the better in order to prevent other forces from stepping in. As Giuseppe di Lampedusa wrote in *The Leopard*, “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”.

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