

The Political Class

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The Preamble to the Indian Constitution rules out any form of government of India other than democratic because it constitutes India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic. Part V of the Constitution trifurcates the State into three equal constituents, the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. The composition of the Legislature, the Parliament of India, is of members elected by adult suffrage in the case of the House of the People, the Lok Sabha, and indirectly by the State Legislatures in the case of the Council of States or Rajya Sabha.

The whole of Parliament in the Lok Sabha is divided into territorial constituencies and each elected member becomes the representative of all the people residing in his constituency and registered in the electoral roll of that constituency. Each Member of Parliament then acts in the House on behalf of all his constituents and it is for this reason India is a representative democracy. The division of powers between the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary closely follows the Westminster model and, therefore, India is considered to be a representative parliamentary democracy in contrast with the United States of America, which is a presidential form of democracy. In the Westminster model government power is exercised by the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers who collectively enjoy the confidence of the House and who advise the President on how the executive powers of the Union will be exercised. The minute the House loses confidence in government the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers must resign and the government would fall. In the presidential form of democracy the President is directly elected by the people and neither he nor his cabinet is responsible to the House of Representatives, the lower house in the American Congress or Parliament. In fact in the United States a cabinet member cannot be a member of either House of Congress. There the balance of power is established by the Legislature through its functions of legislation and approving the budget, but by itself Congress cannot either dismiss the cabinet nor remove the President except through the process of impeachment. In India, which follows the Westminster model, legislation itself is initiated by government and because the Council of Ministers is collectively responsible to Parliament the Executive and the Legislature come together in the matter of legislative business. Because government enjoys a majority in the House the Prime Minister can and does influence what goes on in Parliament, whether it be in the matter of the budget, legislation or debate. To that extent the Executive embodied by the Prime Minister can override the checks and balances between the Legislature and Executive, which are a feature of the American Constitution. It should be remembered that the infamous Nazi rule was initiated, facilitated and executed through the entirely democratic process of Hitler as Chancellor or Prime Minister, persuading Parliament to approve the Enabling Act and further succeeding in making President Hindenburg sign the Act into law. This enabled Hitler to rule Germany for a year by decree and one of his first decrees was to abolish Parliament itself and establish an absolute dictatorship.

I mention this because in a representative democracy a Nazi Germany scenario is not beyond the realm of possibility. For example, under Article 75 the President can appoint a person as Prime Minister who does not enjoy the confidence of the House but is a potential Hitler. Under Article 85 of the Constitution it is for the President to summon each House of Parliament and the only restriction is that six months shall not intervene between one session and the

previous session. In other words, after swearing in the Prime Minister the President need not summon Parliament for a period of five months and twenty-nine days. In this period the President would have the power to legislate by ordinance under Article 123, except in the matter of the Appropriation Act under Article 114 because under Article 113 (2) all estimates relating to expenditure from the Consolidated Fund of India must first be assented to by the Lok Sabha and only when a demand for a grant on any subject is approved by the Lok Sabha can it be included in the Appropriation Bill. This then is the principal check on the ability of the President and Prime Minister in conspiracy to convert India into a dictatorship because if there is no grant and no Appropriation Act no money can be withdrawn from the Consolidated Fund and, therefore, government would come to a halt. Another check, of course, is the Judiciary which in India would strike down any attempt to bypass the Constitution or convert India from a democracy to a dictatorship. The Indian Constitution, therefore, does keep India safe from conversion to a dictatorship, notwithstanding an attempt made by Indira Gandhi in 1975 to superimpose her absolute rule on India.

A representative democracy cannot function if, for example, the Lok Sabha consists exclusively of 543 members, each independent and not part of a group or party. To form a government these members would have to come together in a sufficiently large group to form a majority in the House so that collectively this group can constitute a government which will enjoy the confidence of the House. 543 persons can form a group or groups only if they subscribe to and enjoy a common ideology, a common programme, a common platform and common views so that they act cohesively. Such groups are what we call political parties. Section 29 A of the Representation of People Act 1951 provides for registration by the Election Commission of associations and bodies as political parties. Section 29 A (1) reads, "Any association or body of individual citizens of India calling itself a political party and intending to avail itself of the provisions of this Part shall make an application to the Election Commission for its registration as a political party for the purposes of this Act". In other words, the Act governing elections recognises the existence of political parties and provides for their registration, regulation and superintendence. It is the political parties which approach the people to vote for their candidates on account of ideology and programmes of the party as enunciated in the party's election manifesto and the people have the freedom to exercise their choice, not only on account of the suitability of the candidate proper but also because the candidate represents the party whose ideology appeals to the electorate.

In Britain there was a fair balance between the Tories (now Conservative Party) and the Whigs (now the Liberal Democratic Party). Disraeli epitomised the Tories just as did Gladstone the Whigs. In fundamentals these parties by and large agreed, though any functioning and nuances of approach the parties differed. Gradually the Whigs faded away to be replaced by the Labour Party as socialism began to take roots in Britain. Now the Conservatives and Labour are the two main parties in Britain and government alternates between them, but at present the Conservatives share power with the Liberal Democrats in a coalition. By and large the parties are fairly and evenly balanced and this results in a fairly stable democracy in which political parties and their members have to behave, especially in Parliament, because if they did not the opposition would pull them up and the people would not vote for them in the next election. This leads to a healthy democracy. In India for many years after independence the Congress, whose ideology was rooted in Gandhian principles, ruled the country both at the Centre and in the States. The opposition was weak but the prevailing parliamentary culture was such that it was heard with respect and the opinions expressed by it in Parliament on any issue were considered

very seriously without the majority party steamrolling them. Men of the stature of Ram Manohar Lohia and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee carried a weight in our politics far in excess of the numbers they represented in Parliament. Because the party in power had an ideological base and a programme in which the nation came first our democracy was healthy, our politics relatively honest and our politicians definitely nationalistic in outlook. The nation came first and the self came later. The Gandhian principles of austerity governed our politicians, whose life style, needs and attitudes were simple and, therefore, their greed was nonexistent. Govind Ballabh Pant, Gopinath Bardaloi, B.C. Roy, B.G. Kher, C. Rajagopalachari, Jainarayan Vyas, U.N. Dhebar, Ravi Shankar Shukla, EMS Namboodiripad, Jyoti Basu, Gulzarilal Nanda, Morarji Desai, not to mention Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Maulana Azad are all remembered almost with reverence by our people, generation after generation, because of their sacrifices, their simple living and their deep commitment to the people and the nation of India. These were examples of the political class who represented an ideal which has not been paralleled anywhere in the world.

In politics and in the political class the most important thing is ideology. The Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary defines ideology in the following words, "The body of ideas and principles which form a basis for a social, economic or political system: the opinions, principles and way of thinking, characteristic of a particular person, group of people or nation". We cannot have a political system in which there are neither ideas nor principles and if that happens we cannot have a social or economic system. A political party bereft of ideology is no party. Unfortunately as politics stands today there is no party which has an identifiable ideology and I state this in the context of the Communist Party of India or Communist Party of India (Marxist) also. Ultimately the programmes of a party have to be based on an ideology and the Preamble to the Constitution itself states that this ideology must take into account the fact that India is and will be a republic, its form of government will be democratic, it will be secular in nature and it will be socialist in that it will promote both equality and equity. Here one is not talking about dogmatic socialism but rather of a republic in which socialism means that there will be social, economic and political justice for all and there will be equality of status and of opportunity for all. The socialist ideal here would ensure that the right to equality before law enshrined in Article 14, prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth enshrined in Article 15 and the equality of opportunity in matters of public employment enshrined in Article 16 will be the guiding stars of every government, regardless of party affiliations. Socialism in the Indian context also means that the directive to the state enshrined in Article 38 to establish a social order for the promotion of the welfare of the people in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life will determine every policy of government. The question is whether any of these ideals forms part of the ideology of any political party in India and whether in fact any party has an ideology.

Ideology cannot be a matter of the moment. Ideology is the core of any political party and that core can evolve, but it cannot change like a weathervane responding to erratic air flows. Certainly ideology cannot be twisted and turned as a means of expediency. In this behalf I would like to mention Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Prime Minister of Britain. She made an ideological statement when she came to power that she would dismantle the socialist state in Britain and in the process destroy the instrumentalities of socialism. She then proceeded single-mindedly to fulfil her ideological objectives and whereas she faced enormous opposition in the manner in which she dealt with the Arthur Scargil led coal miners strike, the issue of poll tax, the

reduction of milk in the school mid-day meal schemes, etc., she remained unperturbed by the personal unpopularity which visited her on some of her more controversial decisions. Regardless of momentary praise or opprobrium Margaret Thatcher went ahead with her programme to an extent where the political philosophy of the country changed. When ultimately Labour came to power under Tony Blair after a Conservative interregnum under John Major, that party had to repudiate many of its shibboleths and instead adopt many of the programmes of Margaret Thatcher. That is called an ideological approach to ruling the country. No Indian political party today has any ideology.

Up to 1967 the Congress ruled India and by and large the old political class we inherited from the freedom movement continued to uphold Indian traditions. One could recognise the political class and identify oneself with it because it represented the best there was in this country. In 1967 everything changed. Starting from Haryana and rapidly coming to Madhya Pradesh we had the Ayaram--Gayaram phenomenon in which Members of the Legislature were bribed to defect from the ruling party and form a separate group which caused the ruling party to be ousted and new united front governments to be formed for the first time. In the history of independent India for the first time power was thus purchased. Suddenly our legislators found that they could command a price and if this price was paid the mandate of the electorate could be undone and new political combinations could be formed to constitute the government. Of course the new government itself would be unstable, based as it was on bribery and, therefore, having illegitimately won power it had to continue bribing in order to retain power. That was the end of any form of principled government in India and it brought into existence a new political class whose origin was corruption. In order to buy power one needed money and unless the State was subverted money could not be had. Therefore, the instrumentalities of the State had to be overawed and made totally pliant so that they would not stand in the way of illegal money making and to facilitate it the Civil Services had to be suborned. A systematic attack was launched on the Civil Services, they were made to surrender to threat and coercion, the honest officers who stood their ground were identified and isolated and the corrupt and the pliant brought to positions of power. The reason for the existence of the All India Services, independence, fearlessness in giving advice and impartiality, integrity and fairness in implementing the orders of government, was attacked at the very root and virtually destroyed. Thus a nexus was built up between the Services and the political class and the binding force was corruption.

Let me give one or two examples of how the political class has changed. Prior to 1967, in fact prior to 1975 when the Emergency destroyed whatever was left of principled government in India, one could differ from the ministers but one never questioned their motive or their integrity. Takhatmal Jain, who had been Chief Minister of Madhya Bharat, was the Minister for Industries and for Development in the new State of Madhya Pradesh. P.D. Chatterjee was Secretary of the Industries Department. Takhatmal Jain told Chatterjee that a case of one of his friends was pending in the department and that he wanted it to be examined urgently. Thinking that this would please the minister Chatterjee prepared a favourable note and recommended approval of the applicant's proposal. Takhatmalji sent for him and said that he had expected the Secretary to Government to examine the case and not a courtier of the minister. He then sent the file back for proper examination on merit and in doing so he wrote on the file, "Please examine the case on merit. If sanction is justified please give the reasons for this. If, however, the case does not merit approval please advise accordingly. If I still want to favour the applicant I shall do it at my discretion, but your job as Secretary to Government is to render the correct

advice". By way of sharp contrast when I was head of the Delhi Development Authority my then minister, Sikander Bakht, wanted me to sanction the building of a five star hotel at 15, Aurangzeb Road, New Delhi by Bhai Mohan Singh, the owner of Ranbaxy Laboratories. When I pointed out that our Regulations did not permit this Sikander Bakht did his best to pressurise me into violating my own regulations, including a written directive to change them. I had to tell him that he was free to change the Delhi Development Act through appropriate legislation but so long as the Act was in force government could not direct me either to change the Regulations or to violate them. Thereafter I remained the target of his anger, but I refused to give in and the hotel was not built. The cumulative result of this and other fights with his successor, Ram Kinker, resulted in my ouster from Delhi Development Authority and I spent a whole year without a posting. Most officers are not prepared to undergo such a fate and that is why the Services are today in shambles. The moral of the story remains that a principled minister would not accept the flattery of his Secretary and an unprincipled minister would not accept a stand taken by his officer based on law and rules. This is the change which has come about in our political class over the years.

No democracy can function on the basis of the bureaucracy alone, however efficient, honest and forward looking it might be. The power to legislate vests in the Legislature and the power to take policy decisions vests in the Council of Ministers which consists of elected members of the Legislature. At different levels of government, including urban and rural local government, the same position prevails and ultimately it is the elected representatives who, in a democracy, take policy decisions based on their party ideology, their declared programme and the mandate of the people. It is a Civil Servant's job to advise, to point out precedents and the law and to bring to the notice of the decision makers the various courses of action available and the consequences of each. Once a decision is taken the Civil Servant must faithfully implement the decision, though in doing so he must be totally fair, evenhanded and impartial. In other words, the policy decision will be political but its implementation will be totally impartial. These respective roles become completely blurred when all decision making becomes a function of expediency and it is dictated by either the bribe which is received or the fear that is instilled by the possibility of losing power if a particular pressure group is not pleased. Such a political class no longer cares for the duties mandated to it by the Constitution because to it service of the nation, the welfare of the people, the development of the country are not issues of importance. What is important is how to remain in power, may be even for one extra day, so that everything that the system has to offer to oneself is squeezed out of it. The objective of the leaders of the past was to govern well, whereas the objective of the leaders of the present is not to govern at all and yet to enjoy power. The dictionary meaning of 'govern' is, "to control and direct the affairs of a country, state or organisation" Power, on the other hand, is defined as "control and influence exercised over others". If power is used to govern it is desirable. If, however, power is used for self-aggrandisement, for pelf, for nepotism or for creating the means whereby power can be re-purchased, it is highly undesirable. In the case of the Indian political class as it exists today it is the latter use of power which governs all its actions. Such a political class cannot run a true democracy.

What the Indian political class has forgotten is that the reason for its existence is not self-perpetuation. If that were the case India could have opted for a hereditary absolute monarchy. If that were the case India could have opted for a Kuo-min-tang type of autocracy which afflicted China under Chiang Kai-shek before the Communist take over in 1949, or we could have opted for a Pakistan style theocracy in which the most powerful force is the Army. Instead we

voluntarily opted for a secular republic which today has the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia. We opted for a democracy in which the armed forces are clearly subordinated to civil authority. We opted for good government. Unfortunately we have gifted ourselves a government which is virtually non-existent in terms of the will to govern, manned by extremely corrupt and self-seeking politicians and their Civil Service supporters. As a result a country with enormous potential for growth is hamstrung by government itself. India does not deserve such a political class.

Is the situation irremediable? The fact that Indira Gandhi was voted out of power in 1977 means that the electorate will not accept a dictatorship. The fact that the Left Front was voted out of power means that the electorate will not accept single party rule. The fact that in election after election those who are known to be corrupt often lose the election means that the people of India want honest leaders. The fact that where there is good government, as is the case of Gujarat under Narendra Modi, Bihar under Nitish Kumar, Orissa under Navin Patnaik means that people vote the party back to power. Where there is bad government, as occurred in Tamil Nadu under M. Karunanidhi and in Uttarakhand, the ruling party was ousted. The electorate wants a political class which will serve the people rather than themselves. That is the message of the common man loud and clear. Now the ball is in the court of the political parties.

It is time that political parties took stock of the situation and restored the trust of the people in ideology and programmes. That has to start by eschewing every form of caste and religion based politics. Today every political party calculates its chances of success according to the mathematics of caste and religion. That is why Rahul Gandhi, who is clean shaven in Delhi, has a two-day stubble when visiting the house of a scheduled caste person and sports a beard when he visits a constituency with a sizable Muslim population. Does he think that everyone in India is born an idiot and that such symbols will get him votes? Therefore, starting with the Congress it will have to break away from its dependence on the Nehru-Gandhi family, it will have to think in terms of developing a grass-root leadership in which Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Vadra do not count on account of their marriage or their birth and there is genuine democracy and development of leadership based on support at local levels. Then Congress must also have a specific ideological base from which programmes should develop and these should be presented to the people for their judgement. The Left Front, where leadership questions are not based on heredity, must also now decide whether it wants to become only a clone of China, a country ruled by the Communist Party but somewhat to the right of United States in the matter of a capitalist economy, or it wants to function under Indian realities in which a State Government cannot dare to acquire 38,000 acres of fertile agricultural land as the Left Front tried to do in Nandigram for allotment to an industrialist. The BJP itself must decide whether it wants to develop in a secular environment in which RSS is no longer its principal mentor. I say this because the dilemma before the BJP is that unless it widens its base it cannot be accepted in the South and in the East and if it widens its base the RSS may break away. Even if BJP were to work according to Hindutva philosophy, which could further widen the religious divide and polarise minority votes, there is no guarantee that there would be a counter Hindu polarisation and more Hindu votes for the BJP because the Hindu vote is already divided on the lines of caste. BJP fails to win not because the Muslims vote against it. It fails to win because a large number of Hindus vote against it. It is for the party to decide whether it can garner more Hindu votes through an aggressive pursuit of a Hindutva programme or whether a more genuinely secular approach will get it more Hindu votes. One phenomenon in Gujarat where anti Modi journalists, social scientists and politicians have spared no effort to attack Modi, is that

in that State without in any way appearing to reach out to the Muslims Modi has been able to get a percentage of Muslim votes and in the last local government elections he had given party tickets to Muslims and succeeded in having a large number of Muslims elected. This means that at least a section of Muslims in Gujarat feels that good government, even though appearing to be communal in outlook, is more beneficial to them than a government which promises secularism but delivers nothing. Introspection by the political parties will have to include coalescing of parties on ideological lines so that the blackmailing pressure of small groups representing either individual interests or regional interests do not take over and overwhelm any future coalition. In other words, the parties must try and absorb smaller groups so that eventually we have a centrist party, a right of centre party and a left of centre party in which the limits of extremes on both sides become circumscribed. It is this which will lead to more meaningful coalitions and, therefore, better government. Ultimately the political class has to draw itself back from the brink of corruption and go back to what the Constitution envisaged for them -- principled politics whose objective is to promote the welfare of the people and wealth of the nation.

One last point. As things stand today by 2014 we may reach a stage where no party, including Congress and BJP, may get more than a hundred seats. This would lead to very fragmented coalitions and there would be virtually no government. Nothing can be worse than a fragmented polity for that opens the door to a future Hitler. For the sake of India the political class must reform itself and parties which can win the confidence of the electorate and in return deliver good government are strengthened.
