

## **Some Thoughts on Bringing Civility Back to Political Debate**

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For us Indians there are certain truths which we should take as immutable. The Constitution of India, the basic features of which have remained unchanged despite a number of amendments, is the document which prescribes how this country will be structured and governed. Article 1 categorically states that India is a Union of States, which means that it is a true federation in which the Union as an entity exists because of its constituent States. One without the other is incomplete and, therefore, whilst there can be debate on whether this federation needs a strong Central Government with viable and powerful States, or whether the States should enjoy the highest degree of autonomy with the Centre being the cementing force, India cannot convert itself into a Unitary State. The federal structure is here to stay.

The Preamble defines governance in this country in unambiguous terms. India is fully sovereign and this is non-negotiable. It is socialist in the sense that the Preamble itself mandates justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, which means that there is equality before law, there is freedom of thought and expression, every citizen has equality of status and opportunity and fraternity ensures that there will be a brotherhood of man in which no one is high and no one is low. The Preamble also states that India will be secular and, in the context of the partition in 1947, this was a very brave decision because whereas Pakistan chose the path of theocracy we opted for a nation in which everyone was welcome, regardless of religion, caste and creed or, for that matter, place of birth. Secularism in this context is what makes all of us equal. The Preamble further states that India will be democratic and that it will be a republic. One has no alternative available whereby the republican form of government can be replaced by a hereditary monarchy, nor can the democratic process be replaced by authoritarian rule or totalitarianism.

The Constitution has adopted the Westminster form of democracy in which whilst there is separation of power between the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, there is a coming together of the Executive and the Legislature through the Council of Ministers. The Prime Minister is appointed by the President, but because he has to enjoy the confidence of the House, to which he and his ministers are collectively responsible, obviously only that man would be appointed whose party or political group enjoys a majority in Parliament. This is an important point to be borne in mind because it determines the shape that our democracy will take in order to elect a government. Every five years a general election is called for electing members of the House of the People, that is, the Lower House of parliament. Because India is a democracy in which Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and association, it is obvious that there will be different streams of political thought and ideology, ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right. The bounds within which these thoughts will be expressed and ideologies expressed, are that the fundamentals of our Constitution, our sovereignty, socialist ideal, secularism, democracy, republican status and the Union of States cannot be questioned, nor their overthrow advocated. However, within these limitations every group of persons, every individual and every political party has the right to not only express itself but to propagate and promote its ideology. When there are different schools of thought prevailing in politics and the objective of every political party is to win favour with the electorate and thus aspire for power, there is bound to be debate. There is also bound to be dissent, internally within a party and externally between parties. The objective of debate is to convince people that a particular party,

its ideology, programmes and practices is best suited to governing the country. For example, a party may profess dogmatic socialism and nationalisation of all industry and business as the best way forward for India. Another party may advocate capitalism, free enterprise and laissez faire as the best policy for the country. In between there may be many shades and nuances of political policy which different parties may advocate. This is perfectly legitimate and in fact desirable. It is then for the people to choose which party they will accept as best suited for government.

At a time when the Congress Party under Jawaharlal Nehru was virtually the uncrowned king of India and the Opposition was numerically very small, we still had stalwarts like Ram Manohar Lohia, S.A. Dange, Shyama Prasad Mukherji, Rajaji and other towering persons who were in political conflict with government and expressed views contrary to those held by Jawaharlal Nehru. However, they were heard with great respect and their words carried weight. There was a level of debate in Parliament and outside it which was so civilised, so serious, so ideology based that we could pride ourselves on traditions of parliamentary democracy perhaps not found even in Britain. Those were the golden days of Indian democracy and the Indian Parliament. Surprisingly this is also the period in which Nehru introduced the concept of planned economy, not of the Soviet model, but the uniquely Indian one in which justice and equality were more important than Marxian dialectics. The Indian model, recognising that capital formation through private enterprise was just not adequate to accelerate the Indian economy to a higher plane, decided to use the State and public enterprises for building the infrastructure and laying the base for a capital goods industry which could modernise the country. This was not a dictatorial decision but a democratic one in which critics and criticisms were heard, given due weightage and did influence decision making so that the planned economy did not transform itself into a bureaucratic dictatorship. The above example is given to support the thesis that civility of debate did exist in India, partly because of Gandhian traditions, partly because Nehru was a democrat, partly because his opponents were also democrats. Power was a means of service, not an instrument for self aggrandisement.

All that changed in 1967, when in some of the States outright bribery purchased Members of the State Legislature, defections were engineered and elected governments caused to fall through dubious means. Now power became a commodity which could be purchased, attaining of power became a goal in itself and the wholesale subversion of the State to convert it into a means of amassing wealth through which power could be purchased became a norm. All means, however foul and unfair, become legitimate in order to gain power and with this principles, ideology, consistent political thought, pragmatic programmes, all were thrown out of politics and the political process became totally corrupt. When a political system becomes corrupt there are evil consequences which flow from it. Corruption is not restricted to top levels, but soon permeates down to the lowest government functionary. If the guardians of democracy, the legislators and the ministers, become corrupt, they cannot occupy high moral ground when dealing with their subordinates, but they actually use their subordinates in order to garner money. The subordinates, in turn, have to prey upon the citizens to collect money and the rot sets in so deep that soon every point of contact between a citizen and a government functionary becomes a source of milking the citizen even for getting his legitimate work done. This is the state to which we have brought India and, perhaps, in a way the Anna Hazare movement was a citizen reaction to the systematic climate of corruption that we have created. Such a climate endangers democracy itself because if citizens lose faith in the system, then either there will be anarchy or there will be totalitarian rule and both would be highly undesirable.

One natural consequence of the loss of political innocence is that the level of political debate has hit rock bottom. The politicians, having no specific ideology, philosophy or programme to offer, yet want to be elected so that they can enjoy power. They seem to have fine-tuned the old saying, “When in the right, fight like hell. When in the wrong, admit”. The new saying seems to be “Who says you have to be in the right. In any case, when in the wrong thump your opponents”. Carried further the entire political scenario become one of just attacking one’s opponents, not for their policies, not for their performance but on totally personal grounds. The new form of debate is shrill, accusatory, perfectly comfortable with telling lies and happiest of all when heaping unprintable abuse on one’s opponent and accusing him of everything, including murder, sexual depravity and misbehaviour, corruption, even to question the legitimacy of his birth. However, under no circumstances tell the people what you have to offer them if you come to power because the fact is that you have nothing to offer and in any case you only consider them as a kind of voting machine which is to be milked in order to gain power. Ram Manohar Lohia was extremely critical of Nehru, but at no time did he intend to cause hurt and at no time did Nehru take umbrage at what Lohiaji was saying. There was never any intention to cause any bodily harm or any humiliation to one’s opponent and one admires how Morarji Desai ensured that Indira Gandhi was not victimized and Atal Bihari Vajpayee took care of the comfort and honour of Sonia Gandhi. There was at times acrimony but there was no vendetta. Certainly there was not the kind of churlishness exhibited by Mamata Banerji towards the Left in West Bengal after she came to power. If one were to define the politics of those days one to use the word “civilised”.

If one were to survey the political scene today what would one find? There is an enormous promotion of factors such as religion, caste, region, language, group animosities and hostilities, all in order to promote the narrow interests of a particular group or party. This inevitably leads to fuelling narrow religious considerations, generating communal animosity, promoting caste interests over national interests and regional interests over the wider interests of a State, violent manifestation of one’s prejudices, a weakening of the administration, thus endangering the safety of citizens and, perhaps, national security and certainly corruption on an unprecedented scale. All these are the antithesis of good government which, incidentally, has to be the objective of every political party. The Constitution gives them no alternative and the fact that they are doing the exact opposite shows that they have no respect for the Constitution.

May one suggest to all the political parties to read Part IV A of the Constitution which gives the fundamental duties of the citizens. Article 51 (A) states that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India (e) to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women” and (j) “to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher level of endeavour and achievements”. Can this be done if the level of political debate is reduced to a public brawl in which, whereas nothing positive is offered, the opponent is attacked, with no holds barred? Therefore, if democracy is to be saved, if the Constitution is to be respected, if the nation is to rise to new heights it is absolutely vital that civility be restored. The dictionary meaning of civility as per Chambers Twenty-first Dictionary is “politeness”. Civilised, according to the same dictionary means, agreeably refined, sophisticated or comfortable; socially, politically and technologically advanced. Civility in debate and civilised debate leads to

civilization, defined by the dictionary as “a stage of development in human society that is socially, politically, culturally and technologically advanced”. Remove these three words, civility, civilised and civilization from the dictionary and we would have a nation of morons at constant war with each other. A constitution which mandates fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual, gives to every citizen equality before law, calls upon him to strive towards excellence, has no place for lack of civility and civilised behaviour in the political process. The manner in which our politicians are behaving today shows that they not only have no respect for the Constitution, but rather that they hold it in contempt and are happy to violate it. More than good government, more than eradication of corruption, we need to restore to politics a standard of values and morality, we need to return to civilisational roots , we need to restore civility to debate.

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