

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

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Soon after independence, when the first general election took place, one could take pride in the fact that the level of political debate, whether during electioneering or in Parliament itself, was of a high order in which issues were discussed, policies criticised, suggestions for governance were made, the opposition was heard with respect but there was very little personal mudslinging. That is why a stalwart like Shyama Prasad Mukherji or a gadfly like Ram Manohar Lohia could flay the government or even attack Jawaharlal Nehru, but with no rancour and no ill-will. In fact even whilst being iconoclastic, which was the forte of Ram Manohar Lohia, there was also a touch of humour and a degree of humility which took the sting out of even the most trenchant criticism. One actually went to election meetings to listen to our leaders and Parliament itself was a delight because during debate there was point and counter point, the airing of diametrically opposite views but in an understated manner and it was almost as if one was watching a well matched bout of fencing in which the rules were strictly observed.

That was then and this is now. In 1967 the rules of the game suddenly changed because the politics of purchase of power through bribing politicians to defect became a means of negating the choice of the electorate, with bribery bypassing the vote and turncoat politicians unseating governments and substituting new conglomerates in their place. Till 1967 power was a means of governing and promoting welfare. After 1967 power became a purchasable commodity. To purchase power one needed money and for that illegal sources had to be tapped. These sources demanded their pound of flesh, to give which one had to set aside rules, grant undue favours and promote what is today called crony capitalism. Power which is purchased has to be constantly repurchased if it is to be retained and, therefore, the chain of corruption becomes both linear and unending. When service is no longer the goal of government and self-aggrandisement and wealth collection become the only objective then, for the purpose of elections, there are no rules of debate, honesty, fair play or even freedom of choice. This is a harsh reality which we Indians now have to face and the sooner we do it the better.

Let us take the 2014 general elections. Has any Indian ever sat back and thought about the level to which we have reduced this country as proved by the fact that the elections have to be stretched over nine phases because the law and order situation has deteriorated to an extent where elections can only be held under the shadow of the guns of policemen? Because we cannot possibly deploy millions of policemen simultaneously we stagger our elections and move our forces all around the country in order to provide coverage to the constituencies going to the polls. During the course of my service I have conducted several elections, including two general elections and I have been an international observer of four elections in Sri Lanka, ranging from local government to provincial and national elections. Even in troubled Sri Lanka elections were held simultaneously throughout the country and the general elections that I oversaw in my district were part of a one day national poll. If proof is needed of a law and order situation going haywire the nine-phase election cannot be bettered as evidence.

Our Constitution mandates free and fair elections. It allows, in fact encourages, different political parties to present their ideology, broad policy framework, specific programmes and agenda of government if elected. Ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right every political party has the right to do this, subject only to the constraints prescribed by the Constitution, which means that they have to acknowledge and adhere to the principle given in the Preamble that India will be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic. Any party which advocates otherwise has no right to exist. The question, however, is that in appealing to the voters what, if any, are the parameter within which the parties are required to run their election campaign. It is obvious that in the 2014 election there is no great ideological appeal made by any party. For example, the Left is not preaching dogmatic socialism and the Right is not making out a case for laissez faire capitalism. The centrist parties are not advocating Nehruvian socialism. Instead we have a new election paradigm in which all means, the more foul the better, have become legitimate in the effort to gain power. There is complete loss of political innocence and the entire political scenario has 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 political debate is shrill, accusatory, perfectly comfortable with telling lies and happiest of all when heaping unprintable abuse on the opponent and accusing him or her of everything, including murder, sexual depravity and misbehaviour, corruption, even legitimacy of their birth. The new mantra is that under no circumstances tell the people what one has to offer them if one comes to power, because the fact is that one has nothing to offer and in any case the electorate is treated as a kind of voting machine which can be milked. One is not sure whether we shall ever see a replication of how Morarji Desai refused to victimise Indira Gandhi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee took care of the comfort and honour of Sonia Gandhi. At times there was 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

What is worrisome is that the parties now seem to be engaged in promoting factors such as religion, caste, region, language and group animosities in order to promote the narrow interests of a party. One has already seen this translating into communal violence, undue emphasis on caste, senseless violence and weakening of the administration. All these are the antithesis of government.

Part IV A of the Constitution gives the Fundamental Rights of the citizens, including the duty to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood and to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity. Can this be achieved if the level of political debate is reduced to a public brawl? If democracy is to be saved and the Constitution is to be respected it is absolutely vital that civility be restored. Civility in debate and civilised debate leads to civilisation, or a stage of development in human society that is socially, politically, culturally and technologically advanced. That is why if we are to ensure a corruption free good government 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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