

TIME TO THINK ABOUT SECOND REPUBLIC?

By A.K. Verma

Questions are being raised about the validity of democracy in the Indian Republic. There is a widespread view that democracy in India is no longer by the people, of the people, for the people.

The leaders who brought democracy to India in 1947 were giants in conviction, commitment, ethics and morality. There were many of them. Their tribe lingered for many years after independence but their numbers kept on diminishing. Today that tribe has vanished completely. Search as one might, not a single individual can be found qualifying for the citizen's unquestioning acceptance as the leader of the nation.

Responsible for this sad state is the continuous growth of unscrupulous politics, degeneration of instruments of democracy and emergence of new elite, reliant on power of money, muscle and mafia, to monopolize the rewards of democracy. Today, no sense of shame is felt in claiming that compulsions of coalition politics require principles of probity to be jettisoned.

Practice of democracy fundamentally requires that democratic norms will be upheld and observed in all interactions at the citizen's level. But it is ironic that while the Constitution has been amended to introduce democracy at the Panchayat level with multilateral political support, real inner party democracy eludes many political entities and very little support has emerged to secure this end.

The result is that politics in the country is becoming more and more dynastic. In the present Lok Sabha all the elected members in the age bracket 25 to 30 years are closely related to serving politicians. 50% of those in the age bracket of 31 to 50 years are similarly blessed. The fear is that if the trend continues, the Lok Sabha will become the monopoly of a few families in the years ahead. This will be a reversal of history of India getting rid of its Zamindars, Taluqdars, Rajas and Maharajas.

How representative are our parliamentarians of the citizens in whose name they enter the Lok Sabha and participate in the governing process? Most get elected if they can secure 20 to 30% votes of the electorate. Some manage to get into Lok Sabha with 10% or lesser votes in their favour. Electorate indifference has in the past been

responsible for the phenomenon. The Election Commission has been doing an admirable job in educating citizens why they must exercise their rights of voting. But such education cannot disband the vote banks which flourish on caste and other extraneous considerations and which remain prize catches at election times.

All this has had a baneful effect on the quality of people who manage to enter the Lok Sabha. It has not been possible to prevent entry of a large number of persons facing criminal charges. Electoral reforms which would remedy the situation are not seeing the light of the day because no one can be expected to approve legislation which will disqualify him or her from getting elected to the legislature.

The fundamental function of the legislature is to legislate, debate foreign and domestic policies and ensure transparent governance for the benefit of the citizen. Unfortunately the jury is out whether such functions are indeed being performed. One sees a paralysis in action in the legislatures on key issues and a slide towards a greater collapse. The TV is conveying to one and all the images of daily disorder in the august chambers. The citizen is left to wonder whether this is the way to promote his interests and safeguard his security. He fears that the country is being pushed towards a grim future.

As far as the citizen is concerned, he sees a can of worms, in the recent past, opening almost everyday. His long term welfare is entwined with issues of education, growth of infrastructure, research and development and a proper evolution of regulatory systems. In each one of these fields the failure has been monumental. Poverty levels have not abated. Inflation is out of check. Right to education remains a promise unfulfilled. Inequalities are soaring. Corruption has moved on from the tactical level to strategic heights. According to information floating on the internet, there is almost no one at the ethereal heights untouched by the tar of corruption. Cynicism has grown to such extent that few seriously believe that there is a genuine will to fight the demon of corruption. At the same time one notes a popular desire to punish corruption. According to some psephologists, the change in the fortunes of some leading lights in recent State Assembly elections was brought about by the changing perceptions of the electorate on the issues of corruption.

Appropriate laws and mechanisms are the crying need of the hour for controlling corruption. The mobilization under Anna Hazare last year was a measure of the popular disenchantment in the public mind. It will be a mistake to think that that mobilization has petered out. Anger in the people's awareness on this issue is like a volcano which can burst out at some time or other, perhaps sooner than later. Public esteem for those presiding over the destiny of the nation has touched an all time low.

The thinking classes in the country are cognizant of these trends and in their think tanks, seminars and intellectual discussions have been shouting for reforms. There have been a plethora of events on Administrative, Electoral, Judicial, Intelligence and Police reforms but no meaningful action has been consummated in any of these sectors. The case of Police reforms is reflective of the mind set of the governing classes who are refusing to allow the mechanisms of police to be established on the principles of autonomy despite mandatory orders of the Supreme Court to do so. In plain words this is an illustration of how the political executive is ready to flout the dictum of the highest judiciary in the country in order to protect its own interests. Concomitant with this reality is the question: is the Supreme Court so helpless that it cannot ensure its deadlines? The Supreme Court may be keen to avoid a direct confrontation with the executive, and perhaps for good reasons. Right in our neighbourhood, a drama is being enacted where a Prime Minister is publicly refusing to carry out the injunctions of his Supreme Court and announcing his readiness to face contempt proceedings.

The issues highlighted above have very wide amplitude. It will be no exaggeration to state that the problems of poor governance and corruption are part of a common mosaic which includes black money, stagnant or declining economy, and the nation's security. Such an amalgam constitutes a threat not only to the individual citizen but also to the integrity, cohesiveness and unity of the entire nation. Under these circumstances the sovereignty of the citizen from whom is derived all the powers of the Constitution, just becomes a concept on paper. Now, according to some, the consequent denial of freedom of thought, expression and action to citizens, guaranteed under the Constitution, on account of the degeneration of the systems, legislative, executive and judicial, has been of an order that no cure can be expected from them. When the whole

body has been affected by cancer, an attempt at remedying part by part will bring no solution.

One has again to go back to 1947 to understand that the seeds for such a harvest were planted then, though the intentions were honourable. The systems that were inherited from the British Raj in 1947 continue substantially in the same format and form. Those systems belonged to a different age and era, when the sovereign resided in Britain and the subject people in India. A new era dawned in 1947 when sovereignty was transferred to the subject people. The quality of governance was expected to change dramatically but this did not happen as the governing machinery remained colonial in temper and practice and the new governing classes allowed their idealism to be subverted by pursuit of power for self enrichment. The consequential effects were soon seen in all the three organs of governance, legislature, judiciary and executive. The legislatures have also become the playground for the rich as the wealth returns of candidates seeking elections to the legislatures in the recent past indicate. It is not, thus, surprising that the quest for economic justice remains a distant dream and the rich become richer but the poor poorer.

Today's India requires basic reforms, not just structural reforms as well as a vision. Vested and greedy elements have to be eliminated. The whole society needs to be transformed, not just a small nucleus of people. Any roadmap, drawn to reach an envisaged destination, will remain unattainable, unless new paradigmatic norms are brought in existence.

A vision of India involves the setting of a goal, what India should be at the end of a specified period, say 20 years, and crafting a roadway for it. The starting point for developing a vision would be our present potential, not in an abstract sense, but how far we are actually matching it. Our vision can be built up only on the basis of the development of the marginalized sections of our people. At the heart of such development will be elements such as law and order, corruption free administration, social and economic justice, and fair treatment of weaker classes and so on. Such a vision requires expansion of fundamental rights of the citizen. He should have the right to recall his elected representatives and to demand referendum at the national, state, district and village levels. This is a vision of direct democracy. Such ideas should be an indivisible

part of the democracy we should cherish for our country. Unfortunately, the present state of national politics, divisive, fractured and mutually distrustful, absolutely rules out acceptance of a comprehensive programme of reforms. National parties do not seek same answers.

So, what is the way to challenge these multiple problems of failure in the country and to create a new vision? Perhaps, time has come for India to think of a Second Republic. A holistic exercise seems called for because piecemeal remedies have not been found to be effective. The Constitution has been amended more than a hundred times but structural fault lines continue. The example of France may be kept in mind where Charles DeGaulle led France into the Fifth Republic to tackle problems which were defying solutions.

Methodology will have to be thought out also since altering the basic structures of the Constitution is presently forbidden. But the country appears to be in a mood for changes. Those who fall within the spectrum of demographic dividend i.e. the young, are likely to be the most favourably inclined as without substantives reforms their future can remain stuck in the dark doldrums of uncertainty and despair.

Who should take a lead in this exercise? Before that is answered the parameters need to be determined. One is that it should be entirely apolitical and non-communal. The second is that it should be all inclusive. The third is that it should be single pointed: individual agendas must fall within its rubric.

Success will depend on whether a national consensus can be achieved and a critical mass created through a coalition of urban and rural elites and populations. The urban elites will have to carry the burden of leading through seminars, lectures, talk shows, articles and books to raise the level of awareness. Organised action can generate mobilization from which an overall leader can emerge. Media and social networks like internet, facebook and twitter can adds depth and dimension. Opposition will come from those who desire status quo and no change. But perhaps, reforms can not be stopped as their time has come.