
CLEAN POLITICS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

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Max Weber, the great German scholar and philosopher originated the idea of professional politicians.¹ Politics, just as economic pursuits may be a man' s avocation or his vocation. One may engage in politics, and hence seek to influence the distribution of power within and between political structures, as an occasional politician. We are all occasional politicians when we cast our ballot or consummate a similar expression of intention such as applauding or protesting about political matters etc. The whole relation of many people to politics is restricted to this.

But there are people who make politics as vocation. According to Weber, there are two ways of making politics one's vocation. Either one lives for politics or one lives off politics. He who strives to make politics a permanent source of income, lives off politics as a vocation, whereas he who does not do this lives for politics. "Under normal circumstances", writes Weber, the politician must be economically independent of the income politics can bring him".²

But in India most of our politicians entirely depend upon the income which politics can bring them. They are professional politicians who live off politics. Our polity distinguished itself in assuming an oligopolistic stance. Under oligopolistic political culture, the polity is infected with a multiplicity of power seeking professional groups in which the policies are homogeneous and differentiated norms are minimal but where entry is largely restricted. It is a competition among the few and the elections are devices by which political groups seduce the masses with illusion of power and influence, E. M. Forster depicts such seduction and disillusion in the following ways "And thus, whichever way I vote, I get into the same old boat, and my Mr. Brown and Mr. Grey are rowing it in the same old way", Under this system, the fact that one party, rather than another, wins an election, does not produce significant changes except that one professional is replaced by another. On the face of it they show the much opposition and hostility to each other but largely there is a hidden tacit understanding between them to watch their interests.³

Nobody expects politics to be synonymous with ethics. And when politics is a profession one can legitimately earn his Livelihood from it. But the unusual predicament facing India is that

an unacceptably large percent age of 5000 members of parliament and the state legislatures have sunk to such a level that to call their manoeuvres a rat race for winning elections and gaining-wealth would be defamatory of rats.

With Politics turning into a business enterprise-in fact the most flourishing industry which knows no recession or slump-a new breed of political entrepreneur has emerged ready to storm the citadels of power. If the older political class that goes with it, is in itself the greatest achievement of lost its agenda and commitment to any worthwhile objective of public good in its bid to stay in the game, the new class of political entrepreneurs has no such commitment to start with. They join politics to make good themselves because it provides opportunities for the type of qualities and skills they possess to have full play. By virtue of their qualifications and character, many of them would not qualify even for the job of a clerk in government, but politics affords to them unlimited opportunities for unlimited success. The very qualities and personality traits which make them unacceptable in other walks of life became their big assets in the business of politics.

It won' t perhaps be quite appropriate to call them career politicians, like career diplomats, career civil servants and other professionals. Because every career or profession has certain basic codes and norms to guide the conduct of its members in the profession. One talks of professional ethics or code of medical, or legal profession, for instance, requiring a doctor or a lawyer to do this and do that. One talks of business ethics of trade and industry. There is no such ethics or code for the business of politics to guide those who join it. Neither does it requires any licence or registration to embark upon and is in that sense freest of all professions to enter.

Bertrand Russell, the eminent British philosopher observed that "every opinion becomes respectable if you hold it for a sufficiently long time."⁴ Today it may not be respectable to think that India can become corruption free. But similar was the situation, at the height of British imperialism, when it was unthinkable that the sun would ever set on the British Empire. Nevertheless, the leaders of our freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi made the idea, that India can become free of colonialism, a reality. Their opinion about a free India, which at one time might have been considered as a dream or impossibility, became a reality.

This goes to prove the truth of the statement made by the French writer Victor Hugo who said "There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come." Perhaps looking to the extensive corruption in every walk of life that we see in India today, the idea that India must improve and become a less corrupt country is an idea whose time has come.

The third observation was made by another French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville. He said that "The inevitable becomes intolerable the moment it is perceived to be no more inevitable." Today the citizens of India may view corruption as inevitable. The moment the citizens of the country realise that corruption is not inevitable, corruption will become intolerable and we can hope to see a dramatic change coming up in the country for the better.⁵

The fourth observation is attributed to the British writer George Bernard Shaw. He said: "An ordinary person accepts the limitations of life in the society in which he lives and leads a peaceful life. The unreasonable man wants the society to change to his way of thinking and in the process achieves success."⁶ It may be recalled that when Gandhiji was in South Africa, he was thrown out in the middle of the night from the first class compartment of the train in which he was travelling, even though he had a valid first class ticket, because he was black. Many other Indians in his position would have accepted the injustice of the system and led a peaceful life. But Gandhiji who was a great moral leader thought this to be an unfair system and rebelled against it. Satyagraha was born in the mind of Gandhiji on that railway platform that night in South Africa. Citizens who take an activist approach to fighting corruption in our country will be following the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi.

It is a paradox of history that the empire builders of a foreign land who started their acts in India with naked corruption ended up handing over a relatively clean administration to the leaders of independent India. It is a greater paradox that although our nation builders started off with the highest standard of probity and purity, we find ourselves trapped in the cesspool of corruption.

There is no denying of the fact that during the British period there was systematic corruption from the viceroy to the lowest revenue official. But in comparison with the present situation one is tempted to give them a clean chit. Otherwise, there is an Interesting story about Lord Wavell who, after a distinguished military career, became viceroy of India in 1945. He had chosen the tenure of his Viceroyalty to celebrate his daughter's wedding and invitations had been sent, several months in advance to the rulers of 700 odd Indian princely states. Each invitation was accompanied by a list of articles which the bride and the bridegroom would like to receive as gifts (if the invitee wanted to offer any) also the name of a European establishment in Calcutta where the articles could be obtained. The princes dutifully bought the gifts paying fabulous prices, in which the viceregal personal staff had apparently a commission². But ironically the new labour Government in Britain suddenly replaced Lord Wavell by Lord Mountbatten and the venue of wedding had to be shifted to London. The

princes immediately noted the difference between the Viceroy's daughter and Miss Felicity Anne. Many of the gifts were exchanged for less expensive and more ordinary articles.⁷

The story, perhaps apocryphal, illustrates the devious ways in which the then rulers practised corruption at the highest level, even conceding that it is a common British practice for recipients of gifts to make it known what they want. It was common for viceroys and Governors to go round the country or their respective provinces, as the case might be, a few months before their retirement or transfer, ostensibly for leave taking, but actually for garnering gifts and cash.

While looking at any aspect of politics in India- the mind automatically goes back to its fountain spring-Mahatma Gandhi. He was very much suspicious of political power and rejected the normal notion of it, in the preface to his autobiography, Gandhi wrote that his devotion to truth had drawn him into politics, that his power in the political field was derived from the spiritual experiments with himself.⁸ He was very much concerned with spiritualization of political life and political institutions. He repeatedly insisted that politics could not be isolated from the deepest things of life. He said that when he found himself drawn into the political coil, he asked himself what was necessary to remain untouched by immortality, untruth and political gains, and decided that a servant of the people must discard all wealth and private possessions. In his own words, "the ministers and the legislators have to be watchful of their personal and public conduct. They have to be, like Caesar's wife, above suspicion in everything. They may not make private gains for themselves or for their relatives or their friends. If the relatives or friends get any appointment, it must be only because they are the best among the candidates, and their market value is always greater than what they get under the Government. The ministers and legislators have to be fearless in the performance of their duty. They must always be ready to risk the loss of their seat or office".⁹

Gandhi missed no opportunity to expose corruption, just posing the extravagant ways of the rulers with the poverty of the mass of the people. He used to cite corruption as one of the main causes of India's backwardness. He waged a relentless battle against this evil, in fact the system which it was heir to, but he was not slow to realize that transfer of power from British to Indian hands would not automatically exercise the evil, especially when the old administrative system continued to prevail. He was aware that after assuming office his own followers might fall into the ways of their British predecessors. He made himself the watchdog of public behaviour of his followers even at the risk of offending many of them.

There is an interesting example of the Mahatma objecting to the Andhra leader, the late Sh. T. Prakasam becoming Chief Minister of Madras in 1946 because he had appropriated to

himself a purse of Rs. 30,000 given to him by the people of Andhra. Gandhi contended that the money was given to Prakasam not for his personal use, but in capacity as a public man. He, therefore, argued that it should have been made over to the party. When Prakasam ultimately offered to do so, Gandhi pertinently asked him how he proposed to receive it. Prakasam could have no doubt obtained the sum from any of his rich friends, but in Gandhi' s eyes it was tantamount to corruption, because in return for the money they would expect some favour from him when he became Chief Minister. The Mahatma took this stand in spite of the fact that T. Prakasam had thrown away a roaring practice at the bar when he plunged into the national struggle and had also given away to the party his entire property with some hundreds of thousands of rupees.¹⁰

The slide down started almost from the first taste of power in 1937 when Congress Ministries were formed. The venerable Mahatma was seriously concerned about growing corruption in Congress ranks and lashed out at it in the columns of 'Harijan'. In May 1939, he told the Gandhi Seva Sangh workers, "I would go to the length of giving the whole Congress organization a decent burial, rather than put up with the corruption that is rampant".¹¹ Nehru felt more or less the same way. In a letter to Gandhi on April 28, 1938 he lamented, " What is far worse is that we are losing the high position that we have built up with so much labour in the hearts of the people. We are sinking to the level of ordinary politicians who have no principles to standby and where work is governed by a day to day opportunism." ¹² Gandhi was much relieved when the Congress Ministers resigned in October 1938 on political issues arising out of Britain's entry in World War II.

Gandhi' s objection to political power was not minimized with establishment of National Government in 1947. He was singularly alone in this respect of declining power even in a free state. Architects of other nations were absorbed in power soon after they were victorious. This is true of those leaders who led a successful revolution and established powerful regimes in their countries. But Gandhi was unique amongst all builders of nations. In his last testamont on January 29,1948. Gandhi warned Congress about the danger of political corruption and solemnly recommended its dissolution as a political party.¹³

Deviations from the standards set by such an omnibus personality as Gandhi are inevitable. But in no sphere of political life deviation from the Gandhian legacy is as sharp and glaring as in the personal conduct and integrity of politicians. It is not really a deviation but a right reversal of the legacy.

The milling crowds that witnessed the hoisting of the tricolour on 15th August 1947 and the millions in all parts of the country who were a part of such exciting scenes elsewhere, did not aspire for the stars. They did not ask for milk and honey flowing through India after the British left. But they had not bargained for what they are living through today with layers and layers of corruption around. They did expect their country would be better-freer, cleaner and more decent place for them and their progeny to live in.

But one clarification would perhaps be in place when politicians are referred to as corrupt, it is not meant to convey that all of them or most of them are so. All people in such a heterogeneous calling as politics cannot be alike and are not so. There are honorable men and women still in politics, but they no longer shape the overall character of the profession. The tone is set by those who are corrupt. They are increasingly dictating the rules of the game determining the shape of political practice. Honest and decent people in politics are fast being marginalized. Gresham's Law (bad coins replacing genuine ones) is operating in the profession of politics as in no other sphere of national life.¹⁴

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