

The Challenge of Putting Able Leaders in Place

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Sometimes it is better to let the great men of the past speak for, and to, us. Some of them were clear-headed and could see far ahead and, moreover, had the courage to speak of their fears. Gandhiji told Louis Fischer in 1947: "There is so much corruption today that it frightens me. Everybody wants to carry so many votes in his pocket because votes give power." He added. "Under adult suffrage, if we are worth our salt, we should have such a hold on the people that whomsoever we choose would be returned."

Rajendra Prasad, while closing the Constituent Assembly on 26th November, 1949, stated his fears when he said: "I would have liked to have some qualifications laid down for the members of the legislature. It is anomalous that we should insist upon high qualifications for those who administer or help in administering the law but none for those who made it except that they are elected. A law-giver requires intellectual equipment but even more than that, capacity to take a balanced view of things to act independently and, above all, to be true to those fundamental things of life – in one word – to have character".

Prasad further said: "Whatever the Constitution may or may not provide, the welfare of the country will depend upon the way in which the country is administered. That will depend upon the men who administer it.... If the people who are elected are capable and men of character and integrity, they would be able to make the best even of a defective Constitution. If they are lacking in these, the Constitution cannot help the country. After all, a Constitution, like a machine, is a lifeless thing. It acquires life because of the men who control it and operate it and India needs today nothing more than a set of honest men who will have the interest of the country before them."

Later, he was more robust and frank: "We can adopt for ourselves any Constitution we like. But the Constitution which we have drafted is a copy of the constitutions of Western countries. There is nothing new in it! For example, we believe in democracy. We feel it necessary to have adult franchise, which means, and therefore, our Constitution provides that whether a person is illiterate or learned, a saint or a thief, a man of good character or a wicked man — the value of his vote is the same. Not only this; but even those who will be elected to our legislatures and on whom will devolve the responsibility of running the administration — they need not have any true or special qualifications. Every man, however unworthy he may be — whether that unworthiness arises out of lack of education, culture or want of character — is entitled to be elected and to represent the people. We desire the good of the country. We desire that all its nationals should prosper. But does not this require both character and ability? It that is so, we are making no specific provision for these in our Constitution because we do not find it in any constitution in the West. If we could devise some method by which knowledge and character, and character even more than knowledge, would be required of those who would be called upon to run the administration of the country, we should make an original contribution to constitution making. But we have not been able to do so; for our minds have been so influenced and molded by Western thought that we cannot see or grasp a non-Western idea or concept. This is not our fault, but the fault of the kind of education we have had."

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as Prime Minister, on 11 November 1996 launched a hard-hitting attack on the electoral system. He said: "The natural inclinations of today's MPs and MLAs is to get involved in the executive function — that too without accountability and much capability."

The exceedingly high premium placed on capturing power by fair or foul means is because of the elected representatives' conviction that power is the passport to personal prosperity. Corruption in the governing structures has, therefore, corroded the very core of elective democracy. I often wonder whether the Westminster model has been defeated by the Indian reality. Is it time to think in terms of a Second Republic?"

Before we consider a Second Republic one needs to look back at history. In 921 AD, officials of the Chola King Parantaka I formulated an electoral policy for Uttamerur-caturvedi-mangalam, which was inscribed on its temple wall. It prescribes positive requirements of the candidate — conversant with business and virtuous and have made an honest living, have a pure mind, etc.

It also set down disqualifications — not submitting accounts, committing any of the “first four of the five great sins”, been foolhardy, stolen other's property etc. What is even more drastic is that these disqualifications extended to almost all the disqualified man's blood relations and even his and their in-laws. Rajendra Prasad would have approved!

It is clear enough that qualifications for candidates for elected office are needed. An unacceptable proportion of those elected have criminal cases of varying intensity and continuing tenure. However, along with strict qualification and disqualifications and effective methods of enforcing them is the need to eliminate money from elections.

While in the past, party funds were provided for candidate's expenses, the current party leaderships require candidates to fund their own expenses and recover the same if, and when, they succeed. Politics has become business.

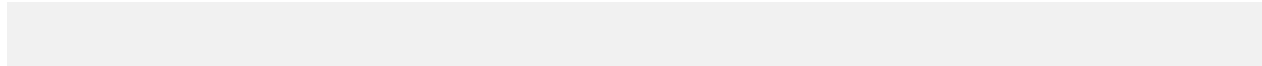
The solution to this is for the state to fund political parties — and not just for election expenses but also for on-going administrative needs. However, in order to be eligible for state funding, political parties should have to: (1) maintain membership rolls and collect annual membership fees that are audited by the Election Commission, (2) hold annual elections of the leadership, (3) select candidates as per strict qualifications and disqualifications, (4) have candidates elected by the relevant constituency party members, (5) file election expenses for audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India and (6) face stoppage of funding and de-recognition of the party for violation of above conditions .

We certainly need a new and effective way of electing honest, knowledgeable and competent elected officials. The sooner the process is reformed, the better it will be to prevent other forces from stepping in.

As Italian author Giuseppe di Lampedusa wrote in the novel *The Leopard* published in 1958: “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”. Otherwise, this current 'Republic' will continue to descend towards its disastrous end and a new one will arise, whose character we can only guess.

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