

Governance Reforms, Development and Civil Society

by

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The ubiquitous role of the hyperactive Indian state has made deep inroads into most people's lives. As the state started affecting the lives of a very large number of people, influence peddling, and mediation through power brokers have become all too common. The citizens' dependence on state for livelihood became very common as the state had become the biggest employer of organized workers. Even today, about 20 million persons are employed by the Indian state (Union and state governments and public sector undertakings) out of a total organized wage-earning work force of about 30 million. Such a large and overwhelming role of government as the principal employer in organized sector is unique to only South Asia. The citizens' dependence on state for livelihood, inputs in agriculture, permits, licenses and quotas; the monopolies of public sector, the VIP quota culture for everything ranging from a railway ticket to a cricket match, needless restrictions on trade and marketing of agricultural products, state's monopoly in almost all public goods and amenities, its control and ownership of all public utilities — all these meant that civil society has become vulnerable to the depredations of state machinery as never before.

This spawned a centralized and feudal oligarchic culture and most state institutions became hotbeds of corruption, crime, intrigue and nepotism. Power has become an end itself, and is no longer the means to public good. Unbridled and irresponsible populism, knee-jerk opposition to those in power, unbridgeable chasm between rhetoric and action, endless opportunism, and shameless plunder of the state's resources have become the hallmarks of our governance system. All that matters is a hand in the till of state, and an opportunity to indulge in legal plunder and constitutional brigandage. Once in power by hook or by crook, principles, ideology or public opinion are of little consequence. Appointment of public servants to key offices, transfer of inconvenient employees, licensing, distribution of patronage in the form of subsidies and benefits to the poor, public distribution system, government contracts and tenders, mining licenses, permission to exploit forest produce, maintenance of law and order, crime control, crime investigation and prosecution, execution of public works, toll gates – all have become the play things of state functionaries. Most players in the power game are not enthused by any idealism, but have become mercenaries who rig polls and resort to violence at the behest of 'leaders' and expect in return to partake in the plunder and share the booty. The resultant corruption and parasitism have made politics the most attractive and least risky commercial proposition. In fact

* This paper draws heavily from the author's earlier writings, particularly the essays "Civil Society and Governance", and "Political Reforms and Economic Prosperity".

the word 'politics' itself has acquired a very pejorative connotation. Given the economic power wielded by state and the deliberate efforts to prevent legitimate accumulation of individual wealth in the name of socialism have meant that no civil society group would be able to command the resources or influence to combat abuse of state power.

This intrusive and interventionist role of state has not only undermined individual initiative, but has also hampered social harmony and economic growth. A closer examination of the OECD countries shows that in the real world, most states pursue economic policies that combine the libertarian principle of *laissez faire* with expenditure for promoting social good in the form of education, health care and welfare. Notwithstanding Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the public expenditure in OECD countries is about 45% of GDP on an average. India's public expenditure as a share of GDP is lower than every OECD country, except the two city-states of Hong Kong and Singapore. The social expenditure of those countries alone accounts for 25% of GDP, adjusting for country-variations. The high-income countries spend 5.6% of GDP on public education and 6.4% of GDP on public health. Medium income countries spend only 4.6% and 3.2% of GDP on education and health respectively, while India spends a measly 3.2% and 0.9% on these two sectors.

Contrary to the prudent economic policies of the OECD countries the Indian state, focused most of its energy in the economic sphere of license-permit-quota-raj. Consequently, the legitimate and vital spheres of state activity have been ignored to the detriment of public. For instance, there are eight crore children with no access to school education, 70 crore people without access to proper toilets, shortage of teachers and excess of peons and clerks, and appalling public services and woefully inadequate infrastructure. Without having to increase public expenditure, without having to seek aid from international agencies, these 8 crore children could all have access to basic school education. It just requires some re-allocation of funds and commitment of the governing class. At 50 children per classroom we need to build 16 lakh class rooms. This will incur a one-time expenditure/investment of Rs 16,000 crore, which is equivalent to only 8 days' government expenditure! Running the school — teachers and basic teaching aids — would incur a recurring expense of Rs 8,000 crore; a mere four days' expenditure! A very paltry investment when you calculate the social and economic returns to the country. Similarly, all it takes to provide a safe, hygienic toilet for every household is about Rs 12,000 crores public expenditure (Half the needy households can pay from their own resources if technology and material are accessible, and a campaign is launched to promote proper hygiene and sanitation). This is equivalent to a one-time investment equal to six days public expenditure. Studies have also shown that our public health system can be completely revamped, and health care improved and made accessible to the poor and needy, at an additional cost of only about Rs. 10,000 crores per annum. In other words, we

can build something equivalent to the British National Health Service at only 0.3% of GDP additional investment every year, if only we redesign our institutions and alter incentives and accountability mechanisms.

These examples demonstrate that while resources are scarce, even the available resources are not properly deployed. The Indian state has increasingly become a stumbling block to our economic growth prospects. In spite of huge manpower of the Indian state, public order has been

The Case of the Dog Bite

A poor, migrant watchman's family lives in a hut in my neighbourhood. One morning when walking along the road, a pet dog from a posh home rushed out and attacked him. It was several long minutes before the terrified watchman could free himself - but not before his right arm was severely bitten from wrist to shoulder. There were gaping wounds and severe bleeding, and almost half the skin on the arm was hanging loose. The petrified man returned home with difficulty – drenched in blood and perspiration. After recovering from the shock, together with some relations he went back to the owner of the pet dog to seek some help. After an hour's haggling, he was given a hundred rupees! The owner showed no concern for his plight and certainly made no effort to get him medical attention. The watchman then came to me. My wife and I did what we could to provide help and medical attention. He couldn't work for about three weeks. He had to get dressing, full anti-rabies course, and antibiotics and wait for the wounds to heal. There was considerable pain, fever and suffering. The family, already poor, underwent severe privation, monetary loss, emotional trauma and uncertainty.

In any civilized society the above incident would be a fit case for a civil suit under torts, and a fair compensation would be assessed at Rs.10,000 or more. The owner, whose carelessness resulted in this casualty, has the vicarious responsibility, and should pay damages. In the absence of a mechanism which that can legally take care of such simple torts or disputes in a speedy and fair manner, most such poor people have no realistic legal recourse to get a just compensation.

The Case of the Police Van Accident

A watchman in a local club in a big city was hit by a van belonging to a state special police battalion. He sustained severe injuries to the arm, involving fractures. First aid was administered to him, and the wounds were sutured, without any treatment for the broken bones. The police took no steps to ensure proper medical attention. When he was discharged from hospital several days later, his arm was hanging loose. The police did not offer any compensation. Nor did the matter come up for hearing before any court. The illiterate watchman lost his job because of his injuries, and was without work for over six months. Meanwhile the police frequently approached him to get his signature on a blank paper by threats and coercion, probably to absolve the department of any liability. Months later, he got medical attention and proper orthopedic surgery for his fractures through the intervention of some good Samaritans. The police failed to pay for that treatment. While the man's body is repaired, he was shattered by the whole experience. He suffered enormous pain, agony and monetary loss. But no compensation was ever paid to him. And being poor and illiterate he did not know whom to approach for justice. In any fair system of justice, a compensation of Rs. 50,000 to one lakh would be the minimum required to meet the ends of justice in this case. And yet, there is no justice in sight for this poor labourer

a casualty with increasing lawlessness and near anarchy prevailing in many pockets of the country. Dispensing justice, which is a sovereign and critical function of state in any civilized

society suffered grievously on account of state's preoccupation with the regulation and control of the economy and public ownership of means of production. There are close to 28 million cases pending in various courts of law in India and most people have lost faith in the capacity of the justice system to resolve disputes amicably in time or to punish culprits. As the sanctity of contracts could not be upheld, and contractual obligations could not be enforced through courts of law, entrepreneurship suffered and economic activity stagnated. People were forced to depend on brute muscle power for rough and ready justice. With politics occupying center stage in society and abuse of power unchecked, criminals soon made inroads into politics. All this resulted in an ineffective state apparatus plunging India into crisis of governance. This crisis of bad governance persists due to distortions in our political process. What are these distortions? Huge, illegitimate election expenditure has resulted in money power becoming dominant in elections. The centralized governance system and vast bureaucracy are having pernicious impact on fiscal health of states and the Union. With these distortions, the state apparatus can never function in a productive manner. And an inefficient state apparatus will act as an impediment to economic prosperity. An exploration into causes of distortions in political process and reasons for absence of good governance will provide us with the keys to economic prosperity and political transformation of India.

Vicious Cycles

The distortions of our political process have significantly eroded the state's capacity for good governance. First, the positive power to promote public good has been severely restricted; while the negative power of undermining public interest is largely unchecked. Authority is delinked from accountability at most levels, and in respect of most functions. As a result, most state functionaries have realistic and plausible alibis for non-performance. Second, while the electoral system has demonstrated great propensity to change governments and politicians in power, the rules of the game remain largely unchanged. Increasingly, honesty and survival in political office are incompatible. Third, all organs of state are affected by the malaise of governance. Political executive, legislators, bureaucracy and judiciary – no class of functionaries can escape blame. For instance, 2.5 crore cases are pending in courts, and justice is inaccessible, painfully slow and costly. Fourth, at the citizen's level, there are no sufficient incentives for better behaviour. Good behaviour is not rewarded sufficiently and consistently, and bad behaviour is not only not punished consistently, it is in fact rewarded extravagantly. As a result, deviant and socially debilitating behaviour has become prevalent, and short-term individual interest has gained precedence over public good.

Interlocking Vicious Cycles

In a well-functioning democracy, the political process ought to find answers to governance problems. Every election holds a promise for peaceful change. People in India have been voting for change time and again. But the political process is locked into a vicious cycle, and has become a part of the problem. There are several factors complicating the political process, perpetuating the status quo.

First, election expenditures are large, unaccounted and mostly illegitimate. For instance, expenditure limit for Assembly elections in most major states was Rs 6 lakh until recently, when it has been revised to Rs 10 lakh. In reality average expenditure in most states is several multiples of it, sometimes exceeding Rs 1 crore. Most of this expenditure is incurred to buy votes, bribe officials and hire musclemen. Sadly, the Southern states, which are hailed for better governance, have the dubious distinction of being the worst offenders in this regard. The expenditure incurred in Andhra Pradesh in the current Assembly and Lok Sabha poll is estimated to be about Rs 800 – 1000 crores. On an average, the leading candidates for Assembly spend Rs. 1 to 1.5 crores each, and those for Lok Sabha about Rs. 3 – 4 crores each. The expenditure in the Kanakapura byelection (in Karnataka) for Lok Sabha held in 2003 was estimated by knowledgeable people at about Rs. 20 crores! The eventual winner was reported to have been heavily outspent by his nearest rival. Curiously, the stakes in that byelection were limited: only a few months of Lok Sabha membership was at stake, and both the leading contenders would have to sit only in opposition! Saidapet byelection in Tamil Nadu Assembly too was said to have broken records, with expenses exceeding Rs. 10 crores!

There are three features of such skyrocketing election expenses. First, large expenditure does not guarantee victory; but inability to incur huge expenses almost certainly guarantees defeat! There are a few candidates who win without large expenditure, but such constituencies are limited. Also in great waves, expenditure is irrelevant. The Lok Sabha victory of Congress in 1971, Janata in 1977, NTR's victory in AP in 1983 – these are among the many examples when money power had no role. But in the absence of ideology, and increasing cynicism, large expenditure has become necessary to win. Desperate to win at any cost, parties are compelled to nominate mostly those candidates who can spend big money. Such large, unaccounted expenditure can be sustained only if the system is abused to enable multiple returns on investment. The economic decision-making power of the state is on the wane as part of the reform process. But as the demand for illegitimate political funds is not reduced, corruption is shifting to the core areas of state functioning, like crime investigation. Robert Wade studied this phenomenon of corruption, and described the dangerously stable equilibrium, which operates in

Indian governance. This vicious chain of corruption has created a class of political and bureaucratic 'entrepreneurs' who treat public office as big business.

Second, as the vicious cycle of money power, polling irregularities, and corruption has taken hold of the system, electoral verdicts ceased to make a difference to people. Repeated disappointments made people come to the conclusion that no matter who wins the election, they always end up losing. As incentive for discerning behaviour in voting has disappeared, people started maximizing their short-term returns. As a result, money and liquor are accepted habitually by many voters. This pattern of behaviour only converted politics and elections into big business. As illegitimate electoral expenditure skyrocketed, the vicious cycle of corruption is further strengthened. With public good delinked from voting, honesty and survival in public office are further separated.

Third, this situation bred a class of political 'entrepreneurs' who established fiefdoms. In most constituencies, money power, caste clout, bureaucratic links, and political contacts came together, perpetuating politics of fiefdoms. Entry into electoral politics is restricted in real terms, as people who cannot muster these forces have little chance of getting elected. While there is competition for political power, it is often restricted between two or three families over a long period of time; parties are compelled to choose one of these individuals or families to enhance their chances of electoral success. Parties thus are helpless, and political process is stymied. Absence of internal democratic norms in parties and the consequent oligarchic control has denied a possibility of rejuvenation of political process through establishment of a virtuous cycle.

Fourth, in a centralized governance system, even if the vote is wisely used by people, public good cannot be promoted. As the citizen is distanced from the decision-making process, the administrative machinery has no capacity to deliver public services of high quality or low cost. Such a climate which cannot ensure better services or good governance breeds competitive populism to gain electoral advantage. Such populist politics have led to serious fiscal imbalances.

Fifth, fiscal health can be restored only by higher taxes, or reduced subsidies or wages. The total tax revenues of the Union and state s are of the order of only 15 percent of GDP. Higher taxation is resisted in the face of ubiquitous corruption and poor quality services. De-subsidization is always painful for the poor who do not see alternative benefits accruing from the money saved by withdrawal of subsidies. A vast bureaucracy under centralized control can neither be held to account, nor is wage reduction a realistic option.

Sixth, elected governments are helpless to change this perilous situation. As the survival of the government depends on the support of legislators, their demands have to be met. The legislator has thus become the disguised, unaccountable executive controlling all facets of government functioning. The local legislator and the bureaucrats have a vested interest in denying local governments any say in real decision-making. The vicious cycle of corruption and centralized, unaccountable governance is thus perpetuated.

Seventh, the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system exacerbates our social divisions as it tends to over-represent geographically concentrated social groups and under-represent the scattered minorities. This representational distortion leads to ghettoisation and marginalisation of the excluded social groups, which then indulge in strategic voting. This gives rise to vote-bank politics in which obscurantists become interlocutors of the group drowning the voice of reason and modernity. For instance, religious symbolism and not education and job opportunities become dominant issues of public discourse. This pandering of fundamentalism leads to competitive mobilization of various groups based on primordial loyalties, leading to communal polarization and social strife.

Eighth, the need for money power and caste clout to win a plurality of votes in FPTP system precludes political participation of men and women of integrity and competence. With their exclusion, bad public policy and incompetent governance become endemic, deepening the crisis.

Ninth, under FPTP system, only a high threshold of voting ensures victory. Usually a party needs 35% vote or more to get reasonable representation in legislature, or social groups with local dominance get elected. As a significant but scattered support pays no electoral dividends, reform groups and parties below the threshold tend to wither away. Voters prefer other “winnable” parties and candidates. This tends to marginalize reform parties, and national parties in many state s. It is no accident that the main national parties, Congress and BJP, are directly competing for power in only a few major state s. In most state s, one or two regional parties are dominant. FPTP thus tends to lead to oligopoly of parties.

Given this complex nature of our crisis, there are many who believe that the rollback of the state and hastening the economic liberalization is the panacea to address the crisis of governance in our country. Let us briefly examine this argument.

Is Economic Liberalization Enough?

There are many who believe that the economic liberalization process initiated in 1991 would somehow find answers to our governance crisis. It is well recognized that such a reform process is long overdue. However economic reform, while it is necessary, is by no means sufficient to resolve our national dilemmas. Even if the role of the state is redefined with sharper role in a narrower area, an efficient and just state in a free society is a vital precondition for economic growth and human happiness. Even in a liberalized economic environment, the state still has the duty to discharge vital responsibilities. Public order, crime investigation, speedy justice, good quality school education accessible to all children, universal primary healthcare, maintenance of minimal standards of sanitation and civic amenities, building of vital infrastructure like roads, facilitating economic growth through other infrastructure development like power and ports – all these are the legitimate functions of the state irrespective of the economic system we choose. It is this failure of the state to provide good governance and to enforce rule of law that explains in a large measure the limited success of economic reforms. In the absence of good governance, economic reform in itself will lead to modest growth at best for some period and the fruits of reform will be transient and self-limiting. Inadequate human development and the failure of our delivery systems have led to appallingly low levels of literacy and skills, poor health coverage and hopelessly inadequate infrastructure. The vast majority of Indians are thus left outside the pale of the productive process of the nation.

The situation is further complicated as abuse of power is now finding expression in the critical sovereign areas of state function as opposed to the earlier days when economic patronage of state was abused for personal gain. As long as license-quota-permit raj was in vogue, most players of the power game were content with distorting competition and extending patronage on selective basis for a consideration. The political class and bureaucracy have thus lined their pockets at the cost of fair competition, creating monopolies and distorting market forces and hurting the hapless citizens. However, since 1991 the role of Indian state in licensing and other related economic activities has been on the decline. But in the absence of effective institutional checks against abuse of authority, the state continues to have a wide latitude in areas of sovereign functioning like public order, crime control, administration of justice, crime investigation and related matters. No matter how much we limit the role of state, there are vital areas that will always be within the state sphere. When conditions for good governance are not fulfilled, abuse of power becomes the norm. When economic decision-making power is denied to the state, such abuse of power will find expression in these sovereign areas and society will be deeply hurt. Over the past several years, there is mounting evidence of such a phenomenon resulting in increased criminalisation of politics, greater politicization of crime investigation, and increasing nexus

between political class, state agencies and organised criminal gangs and operators. In effect, such abuse of power in the critical areas of state functioning leads to complete lawlessness and undermines the firm foundations of our society and civilization. In any case, even with economic liberalization the state will continue to play an important role to ensure fair competition. A rogue state whose legitimacy is in question, whose appetite for ill-gotten funds is uncontrollable, and whose actions are not accountable to the people will continue to use the limited economic decision-making power under its control for private gain and personal ends at the cost of public good and economic growth. Therefore mere economic liberalization is not a panacea to resolve our governance crisis. There is no substitute to good governance characterized by liberty to all citizens, self-governing institutions, empowerment of people and stakeholders, rule of law and institutional safeguards against abuse of authority.

It is clear that a flawed political process, high degree of centralization, absence of rule of law, and unaccountable use of state power have severely undermined the liberties enshrined in the Constitution. All these are institutional flaws and have nothing to do with individual morality or values. As Gladstone observed, the purpose of a government is to promote good and prevent evil. The bulk of the people respond to risks and rewards, and the law and institutional design are the mechanisms to increase risks of bad behaviour and rewards for good behaviour. Many mature democracies faced similar predicaments during early phases of their history. Abuse of state power, endemic corruption and failure of rule of law have all been witnessed in abundance.

All those societies promoted liberty by assiduously building institutions and bringing in suitable governance reforms. None of India's problems is intractable. Our governance crisis can be resolved with simple, practical, acceptable and effective institutional remedies.

Governance Crisis and Institutional Remedies

Any governance reform process to enlarge freedoms and to create an enabling environment for their full and responsible enjoyment should encompass four vital areas. The first area of reform pertains to the political process and elections. Elections are the lifeblood of a democracy. The choice of leadership and the process of power determine the quality of governance and state's capacity to promote freedom and protect our rights. Flawed electoral and political process guarantee that no matter who wins at the polls, people always end up losing. In the current scenario, there is mere change of players and no change in the rules of the game. Electoral and political process should fulfill three criteria. First, the process must allow fair representation and encourage the participation and election of the best citizens. Second, those elected should be

capable of surviving in power with honesty. Third, once in office, the elected leadership should have the authority and opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to public good. Obviously these conditions are not fulfilled now. Therefore the electoral reforms process should address the following issues:

- Curbing poll irregularities and rigging through simple, accessible and participative process of voter registration at the post office level; and effective enforcement of voter identity cards and other measures against rigging and impersonation.
- Effective measures to prevent persons with criminal records from contesting.
- Political funding reforms providing for incentives to legitimate contributions; strict disclosure norms with severe penalties for violations; and verifiable and non-discretionary norms for public funding.
- Regulation of political parties to enforce minimum standards of democracy, openness and accountability on issues of membership, leadership choice, party receipts and expenditure, and choice of candidates for elective public office.
- Improved representational models including a combination of proportional representation with constituency election.
- Clear separation of executive from legislature at state and local levels to ensure probity in administration and checks and balances through direct election of the head of government.

The second area of reforms pertains to decentralization of governance. In centralized governance, there is no link between citizen's vote and public good; there is no relationship between taxes paid and services rendered; and there is no fusion between authority and responsibility. Civilized social order, quality public services, accountable government and informed political choices – all become illusory in centralized government, undermining citizens' liberty and promoting authoritarian exercise of power. Therefore, effective empowerment of local government, genuine participation and formal constitution and empowerment of stake-holders groups, and creation of institutions of accountability at the local level are critical. Local government empowerment should include transfer of resources, authority over local subjects and control over local employees.

The third area of reform encompasses rule of law. Rule of law is the essence of liberty and is a precondition for both democracy and flowering of individual initiative. Without rule of law, respect for property rights and sanctity of contracts, there cannot be justice, predictability or prosperity. Reforms to enforce rule of law should address the following concerns:

- Improved appointments to higher judiciary, and greater accountability through an independent National Judicial Commission.

- Creation of an All–India Judicial Service as a highly competent, meritocratic body through a nation-wide selection process.
- More focused writ jurisdiction covering life, liberty and equality before law.
- Complete insulation of crime investigation from political vagaries by bringing it under an independent commission in each state.
- Procedural improvements in civil and criminal justice to ensure speedy trial and disposal of cases.
- Time-bound justice guaranteed under Constitution.
- Substantial increase in the number trial judges.
- Separate tribunals for special disputes.
- Local Courts for speedy and accessible justice as per the 114th report of the Law Commission.
- Tougher disciplinary procedures for ensuring high standards of probity and competence in trial courts.

The fourth area of reform to promote liberty is creation of instruments of accountability. Power is always prone to abuse and unchecked power erodes freedom and dignity of citizens. As Plato said, “the price paid by citizens for not taking interest in politics and governance is to suffer misgovernance, authoritarianism and corruption.” The key reforms to promote accountability should include the following:

- A well-defined right to information to all citizens on matters of governance, with effective provisions for enforcement.
- Citizen's Charters guaranteeing delivery of public services of prescribed standards in a given time frame, with monetary compensation for delays.
- Independent mechanism for appointment of constitutional functionaries.
- Independent crime investigation, free from political and partisan influences.
- Special efforts to promote transparency and improve procedures in indirect tax collection – both federal and state.
- Independent and effective anti-corruption agencies and institution of ombudsmen at various levels.
- Innovative tools to involve citizens in the fight against corruption, like the False Claims Act in the US.
- Term limits of office at various levels.
- Regular publication of property and tax returns by public servants and elected politicians.

Civil Society and Political Reforms

The governance crisis and the reform measures to address the crisis demonstrate that legalistic or segmental approach will not yield results. The answer to this enveloping governance crisis has to lie with civil society itself. In any democracy it is the universally accepted norm that the people are the ultimate sovereigns. The government is elected and officials are appointed as public servants to provide governance on behalf of people, who are their true masters. Every functionary of government, whether elected or appointed, from the President of the republic to the lowest paid employee in the neighbourhood is the servant of the people, paid from the state exchequer and accountable to the public in return. The constitution itself is a creature of the collective will of the people. When the state becomes dysfunctional with grievous consequences, the people always reserve the right to set things right. In fact, it is the public duty of all citizens to exercise constant vigil over the functioning of their servants and to institute mechanisms to ensure more effective and harmonious functioning of the institutions of the state. Collective and informed assertion on a day-to-day basis in matters relating to all public services at the local and community level is the most elementary duty of the citizens. Even mundane services like getting a residential certificate, enrolling the name of a citizen as a voter, obtaining a driving license or getting a land sale registered involve delay, corruption, inefficiency, hostility, apathy, harassment, humiliation and indignity to most citizens on daily basis. The frequent changes of governments have made no real difference over the years. One lesson learned by all of us is that what we need is not merely a change of players but also the change of the rules of the game. However at the local level, collective and informed assertion by citizens will significantly improve the quality of public services even within the existing rules of the game. Individuals are too weak and isolated to fight effectively and can be victimized and harassed by arbitrary rogue functionaries of state. Assertion without precise knowledge of the way public services are supposed to be delivered will create a lot of noise with little positive outcome. Mendicancy and parasitism will only convert the citizens into subjects seeking alms from the almighty state, and therefore assertion of public will in a peaceful and democratic way is necessary.

We have everywhere innocent persons who are afraid of police constables, people who cannot gain access to a government office without a bribe, parents who cannot get decent education for their children in government schools, consumers who do not get provisions in a ration shop, citizens who cannot vote freely, children who do not get immunization in health centres, farmers who cannot sell their products in fair markets, commuters who cannot reach destination on time, public utilities that overprice services without amenities, and litigants who cannot get justice for years. In such a milieu, democracy becomes a meaningless concept and governance becomes constitutional brigandage. Our freedom is imperiled by arrogant governments and inefficient

public servants. Self-governance is a mockery if the citizen is a passive spectator of the misdeeds and inefficiency of those who are paid to serve him. Empowerment of the citizens and stakeholders is the key to improving the quality of our public services. The elected or appointed public servants should be constantly aware that the real power vests in people, and they are merely the functionaries to serve the people. When citizens are marginalized and kept in the dark, unfettered discretion, arbitrariness, favoritism and partisanship will be the norm. Rule of law can be established only by alert and active citizens. An informed citizenry is the basis of a successful democracy. By the constant assertion of an alert citizenry, we can improve the nature of our government and the quality of public services. A citizen seeking a public service to which he is entitled is not a supplicant begging for alms; he is the master asserting his right and making the servant accountable. The government draws its legitimacy from the willing consent of the people. Similarly, political parties are integral to our democratic political process. All of us in civil society should constantly engage the government and political parties. This is particularly vital when our goal is not a change of players, but a real change in the rules of the game in order to build citizen-centered, accountable, just state and promote human dignity.

On many issues of governance and political reform, civil society should constantly interact with the parties and key leaders. There is an even more important philosophical reason in support of working with the executive and political parties. In a democracy the citizen is sovereign and elected representatives and the bureaucracy are there only to serve their masters, the citizens. If the relationship between the citizen and the politician is that of a master and servant, how can the master refuse to work with the servant? Therefore, while there is unavoidable tension between the establishment and reform advocate, there should also be creative engagement to make progress possible. If the government of the day seeks consultation and advice, it becomes our duty to interact with it. "Civil Society" does not necessarily mean that we should always be in an adversarial position with reference to the state and its apparatus.

In a democracy, every election is a mandate for change and political parties and elected governments are the vehicles for change. It is the duty of every concerned citizen to work with governments and all parties to make positive change possible and to deepen democracy. In this quest, the government and parties need to be supported and strengthened, not reviled and shunned. Therefore, we the "civil society" should utilize every opportunity to work with the government for strengthening the democratic governance process in the country. We need to be optimistic that the political system will respond to people's urges, and transcend party differences and act unanimously to improve the quality of governance, and build a corruption-free India helping every child fulfill her potential and prevent all avoidable suffering.

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