

## People, Politics and Prosperity

One of the paradoxes of modern democracies is that people want freedom, and yet they cannot stand politicians.

The national election study, 2004 conducted by CSDS shows that 88 percent of Indians favour democracy. Contrary to elite perceptions, most people value their liberty. The challenge is how to make living conditions measurably better without curbing liberties.

In the same study, about 80 percent felt that vote has some effect on public policy and their lives. At the same time, only 47 percent of the sample agreed that our elections are fair. 40 percent felt that elections are somewhat fair, 13 percent felt that they were not at all fair. 36 percent believed that fairness of elections decreased over time, whereas only 26 percent felt elections are fairer now.

But the really disturbing evidence is about politicians. A recent Gallup poll on trends in democracy shows that only 9% of Indians have faith in politicians. All democracies view their politicians with some degree of derision. Such scorn and healthy skepticism of politicians is in some ways a desirable trait. Undue deference to authority is the road to tyranny. But if over 90 percent people have no real faith in politicians, it is certainly a danger signal.

This mistrust can be explained by three factors. First, political recruitment is now dangerously skewed. There has been a widening and deepening of our democracy. Representation and participation increasingly expanded to the marginalized sections of population, and people started using their vote to punish governments which failed to deliver. But over the past three decades or so the mainstream parties started behaving like closed oligarchies. Family connections, abnormal and often unaccounted money power, criminal activities and highly

polarizing articulation of sectional interests of caste and religious group became the chief qualifications for candidate selection. A few senior politicians with impressive credentials have been inducted into Rajya Sabha. Otherwise, parties could rarely recruit and promote men and women of real talent, commitment and integrity into public life.

Several surveys reveal that bright young people do not regard politics as a career option at all. In any society, the middle classes are the bulwarks of democracy. And yet, hundreds of thousands want to be technologists or civil servants, but almost none aspires to enter public life. Politics ceased to be meritocratic. Parties are either cynical or helpless in meeting the challenges in a complex and volatile society. They despair of winning through honest, decent, public spirited candidates. And the electoral system defines 'victory' in a narrow way, making it virtually impossible to get decent candidates elected through fair means. Politics has therefore become the least preferred option for self-respecting, talented Indians without family connections.

Second, the young Indians are growing in numbers and importance. About 71% of Indians are below 34 years of age. Almost half the people of voting age are young. With the communications revolution sweeping the country and satellite channels beaming images from all over the world round the clock into our drawing rooms, young people are impatient for change. When they see venality and corruption, criminalization and brute force, obscene money power and abuse of office everyday in public life, their faith in politicians is severely eroded. They view politics as the problem, not the solution. In fact the volatility of voting behaviour among our youth is one of the main causes for the strong anti-establishment verdicts which have been the recurrent theme of elections over the past three decades.

But such persistent rejection of a party in power is making this situation worse in two ways. First, most legislators believe that their power is ephemeral. And

many, particularly in states, want to make the most of their opportunity by plundering public exchequer and distorting governance through manipulation of transfers, public procurement, and police cases. Second, parties are ever more populist and irrational in public policy hoping to somehow win the favour of the electorate, or they field candidates who deploy unsavoury tactics increasingly in the hope of somehow winning the elections. In reality, the net outcome of elections is not significantly altered. This is because the major parties tend to put up similar candidates, and leading candidates often employ the same tactics of buying voters, browbeating people with muscle power, and bribing officials. Therefore a system of compensatory errors is firmly in place, with the ugly tactics of each candidate being neutralized by his rival. The final verdict does broadly reflect public opinion; but political recruitment gets worse. Parties can illafford to field decent candidates who want to play fair for fear of losing in an insane electoral battle. Abnormal expenditure in elections therefore does not guarantee victory; but in most cases fair practices and limited and legitimate expenditure almost certainly guarantees defeat! This is the paradox parties are forced to face.

Finally, the quality of public goods and services is predictably appalling. Misgovernance which results from bad recruitment and wrong incentives in politics; leading to endemic corruption, abuse of office and dysfunctional systems guarantee that the delivery of services is bad. Education, skill development, public health, rule of law, urban management, agricultural value addition, infrastructure – all are in serious disrepair. This bad management of government fuels even greater anger and cynicism. But more important, it impedes growth, and does not give the poor and disadvantaged sections the opportunities for vertical mobility. The resultant disenchantment is leading to potential social strife and violence. The democratic process is sucked into a vicious cycle. The increasing sway of armed naxal groups in an uncomfortably large number of districts is just one illustration of our failure to provide competent and just governance.

But the only antidote to flawed politics is more politics and better politics. We need to dramatically alter the political culture. The vicious cycle of money power, public office, corruption and poor public services has driven India inexorably to a low level of equilibrium. The dynamism of our society, ambition of our people, and modern technologies have softened the impact of misgovernance, and ensured modest growth rates. But there is no substitute to better public management if we are to improve our growth rates and make prosperity an inclusive process with hope and opportunity for all irrespective of birth.

Indian people are hungry for change, and the youngsters want to be liberated from the vicious cycle of bad politics, corruption, underdevelopment, unemployment and instability. The parties have to put their heads together, and radically change the nature of politics. Plunder must give way to service, abuse to competent management, and alienation to inclusion. India is ripe for a fundamental transformation through a new political culture. Can our parties respond? Will new forces emerge to galvanize people into action and tap our unfulfilled potential? Or will the window of opportunity close, forcing India to revert back to an unsatisfactory growth and unhappy conditions for the bulk of the people? The next decade will answer these questions decisively.