

NEED OF THE HOUR

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Ever since attaining independence from the British, the Indian subcontinent went through several vicissitudes. Sadly, in a fit of madness during the partition, centuries of shared history, culture and language were suddenly forgotten and millions of innocent people suffered grievously. In the midst of the birth pangs of partition, the dawn of independence also gave rise to many hopes and dreams of a rosy future for the tens of millions of the inhabitants of the subcontinent.

We were fortunate to have been led by leaders of great stature from the beginning in both Pakistan and India. And yet 50 years later, many other regions blessed with only second rate leadership are now prosperous economies and thriving industrial centres, even as the Indian subcontinent languishes in political turmoil, social strife and relative economic stagnation. Unquestionably the erstwhile Pakistan comprising the present Pakistan and Bangladesh, and India have accomplished a great deal over the past 50 years in absolute terms. However, relative to their population and relative to global economic growth, the performance of our countries is far from impressive. As a result, despite bountiful resources, the social indicators of the subcontinent are among the lowest in the world. The appallingly low literacy levels, high infant mortality and maternal mortality, rapid population growth, ubiquitous child labour and wide spread preventable diseases are all features common to the subcontinent. The countries of the subcontinent are among the worst hit by corruption in public life. We all groan under the weight of a highly centralised bureaucracy with a colonial mind set. Our political parties are far from democratic in their functioning and behaviour and have foisted an ineffective governance structure which is highly centralised and divorced from people's lives. Though the three nations now claim to be democracies, both Pakistan and Bangladesh endured more than their fair share of tyrannical suppression of basic democratic rights. All the three nations could not promote a truly democratic political culture. As a result, dynastic succession based on dubious images and imaginary heroism has become the dominant feature of political life. We have been practising politics of power largely unconnected with people's lives. Often people's wishes and their mandates are cynically nullified by powerbrokers. The people, whose dignity, freedom and advancement in life must be central to our political process, are marginalised by feudal and power-hungry coteries.

The people of the Indian subcontinent are as good as any other population on earth. We share a long and unbroken chain of 5000 years of history, tremendous capacity for hard work, respect for elders, a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong, and willingness to subordinate the short term individual goals for the promotion of social harmony and public good. Like any other people, we have our negative features. Illiteracy, ignorance, superstition, rigid caste hierarchies and social tensions based on real and imaginary insults of the past are the less attractive features of our region. On

balance, we can match many other peoples on earth who achieved a spectacular progress over the past half a century.

The problems of the region are too well known to need enumeration. A time has now come when we should work for specific, practical and broadly acceptable solutions to the crisis of governance that afflicts all the nations of the subcontinent. All of us in our individual lives have gained deep insights borne out of our experience, which reinforce our faith in the people of the region. The simple, ordinary people have the capacity and will to improve their condition, if only they have an opportunity to do so.

I will try and illustrate this point with two personal experiences.

A Village school then

I was brought up in a village in coastal Andhra. My early education was in the local panchayat primary and secondary schools. There were obviously many inadequacies. The teachers were few in number and their wages were pitifully low. In those days they were paid about Rs.70/- a month in the primary schools and slightly higher amounts in secondary schools. Even that low wage was paid infrequently because the teachers were on the pay rolls of the elected local bodies -- Panchayat samithi and Zilla Parishad. Salaries were paid only once in a few months as and when the resources were available. For several years there were no proper school buildings. Whenever it rained the school has to be closed, much to our delight. Often there were no teachers with training and skills to teach math and sciences. The road to the school was awful with people defecating habitually on the road side. It was indeed an ordeal to go to school particularly in rainy season. Ordinarily all these handicaps in schooling should seal the fates of youngsters in such villages. However, we had outstanding schooling despite so many formidable obstacles. Many a youngster from my school and from hundreds of other such schools could fulfil his or her potential in a substantial measure.

Over the decades, I have had the chance to visit hundreds of schools in villages and towns. Teachers are more in number and the buildings are better now. The wages are paid regularly since the services of teachers are now provincialized. While there is still a case for better emoluments to teachers, they are certainly paid much more now and their compensation compares favourably with that in private schools. While sanitation is still deplorable in villages, roads are surely better now. However, there are few children from those schools these days who have even a remote chance to fulfil their potential. Nothing illustrates the crisis facing our governance and society better than the plight of the state schools in our country.

I often wondered why the children of today must be denied the chance to grow up to be balanced and wholesome human beings. While we need more resources, obviously they are not a critical constraint. After all, decades ago there were fewer resources deployed in our school education. But there is one vital difference between those days and now.

Every family in the village sent its children to the school in those days. The sarpanch, the land owning class, the dhobhi, the barber and the labourer, all had the access to the same school. The children of teachers studied at the same school. My Headmaster's son was my class fellow in secondary school. So the community had great stakes in the school. The teachers, whose social background was similar to those who were taught, took delight in bringing the best out of the young kids. When it came to benefits from the labours of these teachers, there was no caste or class distinction. I still vividly remember how everyone revered a Scheduled Caste teacher -- a rarity in those days. Dasu Mastaru, as we all affectionately called him, was the darling of the village. Certainly there was caste which divided the people in many ways. But it did not affect the general harmony, nor did it diminish the quality of the schooling. There was indeed some tension and caste rivalry when Dasu Mastaru passed away, but it was because two caste groups competed to pay respects to the departed soul and each caste claimed him as exclusively its own! In short, everybody who was anybody in the village had stakes in the schooling, and therefore there was a happy convergence of stake-holders and influence-wielding in society. The results were extremely gratifying.

The Schools Now

Today, a vast amount of money is spent on school education. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh the state expenditure on schools, mostly salaries and pension, is of the order of Rs.1800 crores. It will not be an exaggeration to say that not even 1800 children leave the schools annually with their potential fulfilled in a significant measure. What happened over the years was the colossal tragedy tearing apart the society and nation and perpetuating misery, superstition, poverty and discord. Over the years, the upper and intermediate castes and the slightly better-off peasants and the local elites started sending their children to the English medium private "convents" and "public schools". Their fascination for English language and the belief that English education would give a head start in life to their kids compelled them to dig deep into their pockets and patronize private schools. This in itself might not be a bad thing for the society, because as the better-off sections of the society took their children out of the state schools, the pressure on the inadequate infrastructure has eased a bit, making it easier to provide quality schooling for those who remained. However, about 95% of school teachers no longer send their own children to the schools where they teach. As a result, while the influence and power largely remained in the hands of elite sections of society, they no longer had any stakes in state schooling. Simultaneously, no efforts were made to empower the real stake holders-- the parents of the children who go to the school. As a result those who had power used state schools as an instrument of perpetuation and strengthening of their hold, and those who had stakes were helpless bystanders and could not enforce quality schooling. This crisis is not peculiar to any region or state of India, and is seen everywhere in the country.

Do the People Understand?

Some people might argue that this question of empowerment is a bit complicated, and many ordinary people do not understand it. Nothing is farther from truth. A couple of years ago during a visit to my village I visited my old school. There is a school peon by name Ramulu, who has been serving for nearly 35 years now. He was a young man when I was at school. He is due to retire in a few years' time. I took Ramulu aside and reminisced with him. We both agreed that the quality of the education declined precipitously. I asked Ramulu why despite better resources and greater awareness, the schooling is so appalling now. His answer was a classic lesson in native wisdom. He said "Babu, when you were children, all the farmers sent their kids to this school. Once they stopped sending them here, schooling became a ritual and there is no life left in it". In Telugu we have a politically incorrect native proverb with ethnic overtones. Literally translated, it means, "The local Dhobhi (washerman) is better than an educated person". By a curious coincidence, Ramulu happens to belong to Dhobhi caste!

People Vs Government

Years after I left school, I had an opportunity to see how true empowerment could make a difference to the people and the country. In mid-80s I served as Collector in Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh. A few weeks after my arrival, I assembled the local legislators in an informal meeting and broached the idea of taking up a large number of small irrigation projects to tap the potential that existed in the district. Tentatively I suggested the possibility of irrigating about 100,000 acres in a few years' time if we all worked together. The legislators laughed at the idea and one of them, who is still a legislator now, said that 10,000 acres was a more realistic figure. At that point of time, they were right. State-owned Irrigation corporation, over a period of two decades could add only 110,000 acres of irrigation in all the 23 districts of the state put together. The implementation was painfully slow; procedures were complex; political climate was bad; people did not cooperate; there was no coordination among various departments of the government; there were inevitable cost overruns; resources were not forthcoming from the government; even if the borewells were sunk and the lift irrigation schemes were completed, energisation took a long time; maintenance was a huge problem; and ultimately the schemes were a drain on the exchequer because the state had to shell out about Rs.500/- every year per acre to maintain them. These were some of the salient features relating to such small irrigation schemes of the state.

Happily, once we altered the framework of the implementation of the schemes, in a relatively short period of little over two years, irrigation schemes with a total of ayacut of 2000,000 acres were in place. 453 lift irrigation schemes and 2800 borewells could be taken up with people's participation, and most of them were either completed or were nearing completion by the end of my tenure in the district. The district did not receive any additional grants or resources from the government, and no person was additionally

employed or engaged. About half the money was mobilized from the peasants as their contribution to the schemes, with their lands provided as security to the banks. The borewells, as earlier cost Rs.70,000/- each for the state corporation and were not energized for years after completion. They also cost over Rs.500 per acre every year for maintenance. Now they could be completed at Rs.37,000/- , of which half the money was raised by farmers themselves! The schemes were completed in record time and energisation was possible instantly. The maintenance cost was borne entirely by farmers and they had complete control to manage the scheme and utilise water resources. 125,000 acres of new irrigation was possible in one district through lift irrigation and borewells alone in two years, as opposed to a mere 110,000 acres in the whole state over a period of 20 years!

All this and more was possible only because the people responded magnificently and participated in the programme and owned the projects. For instance, the selection and sanction of schemes was the decision of the farmers themselves. If water was available; if it was technically feasible to use it for irrigation; if it was economically viable; if the farmers were willing to raise half the resources through banks; and if they demonstrated their commitment by depositing a small amount of Rs.100 per acre, the scheme was automatically sanctioned and the government officials only registered it! Farmers could choose any engineer of their choice among the hundreds of public work engineers in the district to implement their scheme.

If they preferred someone among them in whom they had faith, they could then choose that person to execute the scheme; in which case the state deposited its 50% commitment after proper evaluation of the work done and expenditure incurred. These and a few other steps to remove the usual bureaucratic hurdles and to insulate these schemes from political and factional vagaries have resulted in a mass movement. The villagers worked overnight literally burning midnight oil to complete these schemes in time for the crop season. While an amount of Rs.42 crores was utilised over two years, there was not even a single credible allegation of misuse of funds! The annual incremental benefit on account of new irrigation was more than the total capital cost of the schemes! Many farmers repaid the amounts to the banks well before the due time, to the surprise and chagrin of the bankers, as their secure agricultural lending portfolio as part of priority lending rapidly evaporated! This is just one of the many outstanding successes people have achieved in our country once opportunity is available to shape their own destiny.

Need of the Hour

There are many people in our subcontinent whose perception, integrity, record of service, insights, passion for change and courage to face adversity inspire us. In almost every case of significant accomplishment, it was possible only through people's empowerment and participation. Those who claim that our people are not capable of performing better on account of their ignorance and illiteracy ought to have their heads examined! It is they

who have to learn a great deal about this region and apply their formidable skills and talents to improve the quality of our governance and to facilitate people's empowerment. Our state structure today has become an obstacle to such empowerment of people and creation of a true democracy in which freedom is enlarged, self governance is real and meaningful, empowerment is genuine, rule of law is possible and above all self-correcting mechanisms for governance are available. We have many great people whose leadership, skills, talent and experience are invaluable in building a better future. However, many of them are now working in isolation and are limited either sectorally or spatially in their concerns. No person or a group alone can accomplish the mammoth task ahead of us.

The need of the hour is to build a new political culture throughout the Indian subcontinent and create people-centred institutions that will serve us, the true masters in a democracy. All people who seek people-centred, participative, democratic and accountable governance must come together cutting across the many formidable barriers that separate us. We must draw strength and sustenance from the wealth of our past historical traditions, cultural practices and social institutions. The peoples of the three nations in the subcontinent must help each other and benefit from the synergies of our efforts. We are not living in a medieval world in which state power was often seen in terms of zero-sum-game, where by the gain for one state was necessarily at the cost of another state. We have the opportunity as never before to enlarge the sum total of public good, and partake in it. Fifty years is a long period in modern times. We must rebuild our political and governance institutions and make them serve us instead of suppressing us. We must together work for governance reforms to suit our people's genius and fulfil the aspirations of our children. As someone said with prescience, there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. This is the time to finally shed our past inhibitions, redesign the inglorious institutions that have smothered us, and reject the colonial and feudal political culture that has engulfed us. This is the time for holistic reforms of governance structures to build strong, democratic, self-governing and durable nations in the subcontinent with all our citizens enjoying peace, freedom and harmony. History beckons us.

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