Indian democracy needs liberalism!

By Ajitabh Das

There is no doubt that we should take great pride in calling ourselves the world's largest democracy. But we should not forget that it is not enough:

- Even after 62 years of independence, we are one of the poorest and most corrupt nations on Earth.

- The world's largest number of malnourished children lives in India. Many of them die young. Female feticide is rampant.

- Schemes for the poor hardly reach them. Many farmers have at least partly in consequence committed suicide.

- When attacked or cheated we hesitate to enter a police station to report the matter for that could bring us greater trouble. The legal system is equally daunting and ineffective.

- Not all citizens enjoy the same rights (freedoms) irrespective of region, religion or caste.

- India's internal security is threatened in twenty states by Naxalite movements. And the less said about chronic terrorism in many states, and separatism, the better.

Our political representatives have dashed the hopes of millions of Indians. Instead of competent and caring leaders, we get criminals and the incompetent sons and daughters of former politicians. Clearly something is seriously wrong.

Socialism, the bane of India

Democracy works well only where citizens can exercise their freedoms and rights. Unfortunately, in post-independence India we got the democratic right to elect our leaders but the right to produce wealth and retain our property was denied to us. Well meaning but misguided Nehru established a Soviet style state-centric system, and private enterprise was strangled by the License Raj system. Government bureaucrats became extremely powerful and to get even small things done, the blessings of Sarkari babus were needed.

India thus went to rot for six decades. According to a recent survey the Indian bureaucracy is one of the most inefficient and corrupt in Asia. This culture of deception and corruption has entered our daily life, and our civic sense; even our moral sense, has got corrupted.

The socialist state remained the single most important source of job-creation till 1991. This inevitably led to huge unemployment. Consequently, the prevalence of poverty remained virtually unchanged. Indeed, socialists made India poorer through corruption ridden and ineffective welfare schemes which wasted and drained out precious national resources.

Liberalism: the only way to prosperity

To eliminate poverty, corruption, and unemployment – among many other such evils – India needs to reduce the role of the state on the daily life of citizens. That is the essence of liberalism: i.e. self-reliance. And the state must be subservient to us: a servant; not our master.

Unfortunately, liberalism is often misrepresented in India. It is said that it is the same as crony capitalism. But that is false. Liberalism is, instead, a philosophy

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of individual sovereignty and responsibility that asks us to use our reasoning with an open mind, and to respect (or at least tolerate) differing opinions. It therefore enables us to pursue our happiness through appropriate economic, social, and spiritual actions without unnecessary restrictions from the state.

The liberal does not demand total liberty. In fact, the moment anyone's way of pursuing happiness collides with the interests of other individuals, the state should, and must, intervene to sort out the matter. Having done that it should get out of the scene and monitor the situation as protector of everyone's freedom.

Liberalism promotes prosperity through free markets, free trade and free enterprise subject to accountability of one's actions.

Liberal ideas have a long history although modern liberalism began in the 17th century with thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Adam Smith and many others. But we must not forget that the tradition of peaceful debate and questioning was always a part of India's life thousands of years ago. The ancient Indian texts like the Upanishads ask us to have a free and fearless mind. Buddha's teaching was also based on reasoning and asking the followers not to believe in anyone without questioning.

India followed the stream of modern liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, with liberal activists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and later, Gandhi. This ultimately led to the nationalist movement for independence. To Mahatma Gandhi goes the credit of putting his new theories into practice. "Hind Swaraj" did not mean to him simply attaining independence from foreign rule but achieving freedom from all sorts of domination which includes the unsolicited interference of state into citizens' affairs.

He also believed that rights alone can't render us freedom. They need to be matched with duty or responsibility (Dharma). His theory of freedom through rights and duty was influenced by Bhagwat-Gita. Unfortunately Gandhi's vision of 'Hind-Swaraj' was fully forgotten in post-independence India.

Purification of Indian politics

The dark cloud of socialism still looms over our politics even after the 1991 economic liberalization. In order to rid India of the disease of socialism we need a political movement to spread the message of freedom. Only that will create a society free of corruption, poverty: a society where every citizen will have equal opportunity but equal responsibility too.

In order to realize this dream, we must purify our political system by electing leaders with a clean background, unquestionable integrity, and determination to bring positive change through promoting liberal democracy.

While our present party-politics may not give any hope, the Freedom Team of India (http://freedomteam.in/) is an entity which offers hope. It is a platform to build leaders who will take a plunge into active politics. Our forefathers gifted us a free republic in 1947. Now it is our responsibility to build a liberal democratic and prosperous India.