

TOWARDS A MORE BENIGN POLITICAL CULTURE

- Mr T S Srinivasan (PGP 1967)

A NEGATIVE POLITICAL CULTURE That the political culture, not just in India but across the world, borders on the vicious, will not be seriously disputed. Here is just a brief list of the symptoms that are everywhere for us to see:

- Highly polarised political parties
- News media split on party lines
- Talk shows that degenerate into shouting matches among the political invitees, with the TV anchor often watching helplessly
- The growing tendency to organize protest rallies for anything and everything
- Stopping at nothing to make the ruling establishment look bad in the eyes of the public

It seems fair to say that these symptoms are more visible in a democratic form of government than in a dictatorship. They are an integral part of democracy, they serve a useful purpose and are needed.

Satellite television, powerful news media, a strong judiciary, and an active political opposition - all these are part of a control system that is meant to keep the incumbent government in check and from going overboard in its exercise of political power. It is hard to believe, but the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, that took place a hundred years ago in April 1919, came to public knowledge only a month after the event - something unthinkable in today's world, where satellite television can bring a raging war online into the drawing room of the average citizen.

POSSIBLE CAUSES How do we explain the prevailing political culture that is so negative, and borders on the vicious? I can think of at least three reasons:

- The nature of political power and its attractions
- The kind of people that politics tends to attract, and
- A dysfunctional political process

THE REWARDS OF POLITICAL POWER Political power brings with it two very alluring rewards: enormous power over citizens and institutions, and access to mountains of cash which do not seem to belong to anyone in particular and induce, in the beholder, a strong temptation to somehow bestow it on somebody. And, sooner than later, the beholder finds himself asking "Why not bestow it on myself, my family and those who help me in attaining and retaining political power?".

To the extent that wealth is also a symbol of power, the main attraction in politics is power, power over people, and power over the state's coffers. We might add one more attraction - the glare of footlights, and all the photo opportunities that go with political office. But all that pales into insignificance when compared with power, the main attraction.

That takes us to the next question: What type of people does politics attract?

THE TYPE OF PEOPLE THAT POLITICS ATTRACTS David McLelland, the well-known Harvard psychologist, has identified three basic needs, or motivators, in all human beings. While all three needs are present in every individual, one of them tends to be dominant:

- The need for affiliation
- The need for achievement, and
- The need for power

The table below presents the key personal characteristics associated with each motivator:

Key personal characteristics associated with the three motivators	
Dominant motivator	Key characteristics
Achievement	Has a strong need to set and achieve challenging goals Takes calculated risks to accomplish these goals Likes regular feedback on progress and achievement Often likes to work alone
Affiliation	Wants to belong to the group Wants to be liked, and goes along with group decisions Favours collaboration over competition Does not like high risk or uncertainty
Power	Wants to control and influence others Likes to win arguments Enjoys competition and winning Enjoys status and recognition
Source : David McClelland, "Human Motivation", Cambridge University Press, 1988	

Those with a strong power motivation can be divided into two groups: personal and institutional. People with a personal power drive want to control others, while people with an institutional power drive like to organize the efforts of a team to further the goals of the organization. The latter category is understandably very small in number across the world, and, right or wrong, the people who move up the hierarchy in almost every type of organization, are those with a strong drive for personal power.

It seems to me that politics tends to attract more of people with a strong motive for personal power, to whom control over people and the state's coffers is a significant attraction. There is nothing right or wrong about this, it is just the reality. The self-effacing, saintly type of people, are unlikely to survive in politics, an occupation which seems more suitable for people who seek power and can exercise it. That such people can contribute to a vicious political culture, without exactly intending it, is a natural corollary. That some of them, sometimes, can actively vitiate the political culture in their pursuit of power, is an observed reality.

DYSFUNCTIONAL POLITICAL PROCESS Whether it is the Parliamentary or the Presidential form of democracy, the reality is that one party (or group) rules, while the other party (or group) remains in opposition. But remaining in opposition is not exactly a very enjoyable state to be in, for politicians as a class, given the type of people they are and their dominant motivations, as discussed in the previous section.

To those in opposition, it looks as though the winner has taken it all, leaving them out in the cold. They know there is a constructive role they can play in opposition, but what is that role, compared with all the power, and grandeur that go with being in government, and wielding power? Their inner dialogue may run like this: "The chap out there has made it this time, he has all the power and the glory, leaving me out here to shiver in the cold. And I will do all I can to make him look bad in the eyes of the public". And he devotes the bulk of his time and energy to this negative pursuit.

Thus begins a dysfunctional political process, which often tends to loom large and obscure the substantial benefits of democracy. Technology tends to aggravate this process in the form of fake news, which has been around for a while, and deep fake - a more recent, and scary, technological

advance, which is a blend of artificial intelligence and video technologies that can present something visually that did not actually happen.

And then there are centre-state relations in a federal polity like India. That this vast country has remained intact, in one piece, despite all the fissiparous tendencies that raise their ugly heads from time to time, can perhaps be attributed to the innate wisdom of the people and some constitutional safeguards that were put in place by the country's founding fathers.

On the other hand, centre-state relations are far from seamless, a point that often creeps into electoral campaigns.

An additional issue of relevance lies in inter-state disputes, such as the sharing of river waters between Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. Not only is it big news for television, it is often exploited by self-seeking politicians on both sides of the divide.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? As we have hinted in an earlier section, the core problem seems to lie in power sharing. Can we move away from a situation, where the Opposition feels left out in the cold, and move forward to one in which they can, and are seen to, contribute to policy making in government? Here are a few suggestions that might be of interest to all those concerned about the present dysfunction in the political process,

The annual meeting of state chief ministers, on the lines of the National Development Council meetings, with the Prime Minister presiding and key members of the cabinet present, should continue. These meetings should not be "all work and no play", they should have a strong social side as well. They should provide opportunities for meetings and discussions on the side-lines, between a chief minister and the Prime Minister on the one hand, and between two chief ministers on the other.

It is important for political parties to reinvent themselves, with changing times and the changing mood of the electorate. They need to come up with new narratives from time to time, in the absence of which they are likely to look stale and matronly to the electorate, whose expectations are not just rising, but sky-rocketing. Here are just a few examples of political narratives that can be game changers:

- Amma Canteen of the ADMK,
- Universal Basic Income scheme, of the Indian National Congress (crediting Rs 6000 every month into the bank accounts of people below the poverty line)
- The Chowkidar slogan of the BJP, conjuring the image of the Prime Minister, leading the country into battle with hostile forces outside.

The convening of all-party meetings once in three months, where designated members of all parties, with representation in the State Assembly, discuss the major challenges confronting the State, and possible solutions. A similar procedure can be thought of for the Central Government.

The formation of multi-party committees, both at the State and the Centre, to deal with major topics/questions, such as the sharing of river waters, the setting up or the closure of a factory, enlarging the highway in rural areas, and other such issues.

The point above belongs in the domain of direct democracy. Why not have the people living in a Panchayat vote on crucial issues affecting their lives - such as the setting up or the closure of a factory, enlarging the highway in their area, and other similar questions? The voting here should not be on party lines, but more in the nature of a referendum on the chosen question, among the people of the affected area. Call it direct democracy or what you like, this is what Switzerland, that small, affluent, landlocked country in the heart of Europe, has practised for a long time, with considerable success.

Inter-state disputes are better handled through an appropriate organisational mechanism in the central government. Why not create a powerful Committee headed by the Home Minister, and members consisting of the Finance Minister at the Centre, and the Chief Ministers of the states involved in the dispute? (example, the Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala, in the case of sharing of river waters). This Committee, which can co-opt other ministers, such as Irrigation and Farming, will deliver the final verdict on the disputed question, after hearing all the relevant points of view. This verdict should be binding on all parties to the dispute.

LEADERSHIP STYLE OF THE POLITICAL HEAD The reference here is to the leadership style of the Prime Minister at the centre, or the Chief Minister of a state, a subject on which the political class can possibly learn a trick or two from the corporate world.

There are, I think, broad similarities between a multi-divisional, multinational corporation, and a large federal polity like India. The key point here is this, that just as the CEO of a well-managed corporation follows a policy of complete accessibility to his unit heads, the Prime Minister at the centre, should be accessible - truly accessible, not a phony kind of accessibility with an open door and a closed mind - to his key constituents, namely the chief ministers, including those from opposition ruled states. Why is this important? The reasons are not far to seek:

- Accessibility motivates, and the accessible manager is a motivator.
- The absence of accessibility creates a void, and entirely unwholesome perceptions at the state level, which can be (and often are) exploited by clever politicians on the other side of the political divide (for example, the perception that the Prime Minister chose not to visit Tamil Nadu during the recent storm that ravaged the southern districts of the state). It is not clear whether the Prime Minister is aware of this perception, but the fact that it exists, is not a good augury for relations between the Centre and the state of Tamil Nadu.

There is another important dimension to this point about accessibility. And that is, just as the chief executive of a well-run company assigns top priority, in his daily schedule, to visiting unit heads, it would be very useful for the Prime Minister to follow a similar practice in the case of visiting chief ministers, including those from opposition ruled states. This is not to say that the Prime Minister can, or should, bend himself to every whim and fancy of the visiting chief minister, but merely to be accessible, and to make a genuine attempt to understand the problem from the visitor's point of view. The mere act of listening, with an open mind, can be highly therapeutic.

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Whenever possible, such meetings can end with a photo opportunity, with both the parties being present. The media will do the rest.

ROME WAS NOT BUILT IN A DAY In case all this suggests that the foregoing ideas will make the political culture benign overnight, banish the thought right out of court. Francis Fukuyama, the famous political philosopher and historian, said in 1989, that the fall of communism implied that democracy and the idea of free market economy had won a decisive victory, and history had ended - there was no need for history to continue (Source: *The End of History and the Last Man*, by Francis Fukuyama, Free Press, 1992).

But, alas, Fukuyama had to change that view pretty quickly, and to postpone, somewhat indefinitely, the end of history. It is now 17 years since his prognosis, and history doesn't look like ending anytime soon.

TO CONCLUDE This paper has been an attempt at understanding the present, rather vicious, political culture, and some of the major causes of that culture. Transforming it is a massive challenge, and will need much time and patient work. This paper makes a few suggestions in that direction, but the practical reader will know that no miracles can be expected. A lot of hard work, will be needed, in a spirit of "one small step at a time". But, as human experience throughout history shows, the presence of a strong intent - such as detoxicating the political culture, in this case - makes a huge difference. It opens its own pathways, and generates its own momentum, until the goal is reached.

