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**Need to usher in a...
New Political Culture**

Highlights from the *Discussion Paper*

I. Warning bells for our Democracy

We are at an important juncture where our political system and social setup have to be reformed on a qualitatively fundamental and urgent basis: politics that should have been a noble calling for achieving social good has degenerated into an ugly and unnatural game of raw power. Politics has been reduced to a business of investing crores during elections and earning multiple returns afterwards.

Once politics went down this path of serious corruption, our governance system too followed suit. Being forced to pay bribes in government offices is now the norm rather than the exception. Empowerment of local governments towards delivering vital public services in our villages and towns has been carried out only on paper. Reports on schools that don't work and government healthcare centers that remain practically unopened have become all too common. In the countryside, farmers' suicides continue to occur because agriculture is unable to create profits and generate wealth. Our education system is neither improving skills nor serving societal needs and is putting the careers of millions of young citizens in jeopardy. Speedy and affordable justice is not accessible to an overwhelming majority of Indians. People are gradually losing confidence in the ability of our governance and administrative systems to address their issues and solve their problems.

Several social groups, castes and communities are still facing severe discrimination that is based entirely on accident of birth. This is an absolute disgrace to any civilized society. Such discriminated groups and communities are striving in the sociopolitical arena for their fair share, recognition and self-respect. True politics should contribute to the fructification of such efforts, especially by dalits, scheduled tribes, backward communities and women, into social reform movements. Instead, we are witnessing vote bank politics cynically employing such issues in a truly Machiavellian fashion. Discrimination based on birth and gross inequities in the distribution of the fruits of economic progress are causing severe discontent in the society. The current practice of politics is increasingly failing to evolve acceptable and practicable solutions to such problems. Instead, it is only exacerbating the situation.

If these trends are allowed to continue, it would eventually lead to people losing faith in the very democratic values and institutions themselves. That would ultimately result in serious and tragic consequences of unimaginable magnitude to our collective future. **Warning bells are ringing for our democracy. We have to urgently address and solve these serious challenges.**

II. Should politics remain in this rut?

1. Does democracy mean citizens are merely voters?

The current practice of politics has successfully reduced us, citizens, into mere voters. Citizens, who are the true sovereigns in a democracy, are now mere *ek din ka sultans*; elected representatives, who are merely public servants, have become their masters. The governance system runs entirely on public resources and yet treats the citizens as mendicants.

2. Politics as a 'business'

Politics has become a business of investing illegal money for illegitimate purposes during elections, capturing power and finally, employing public offices for generating multiple returns on these 'investments.' Bribes for transfers-and-postings, percentages in public contracts and tenders, 'cuts' in constituency development funds and even cash-for-questions-in-Parliament have become all too common means for recovering the investment made during elections. Honest, committed and public-spirited leaders are forced to opt out of politics or find themselves left with little space; common citizens too have little or no real choice among political players. Politics is harbouring, engendering and increasingly abetting corruption, criminalization and nepotism. Not surprisingly, the very word 'politics' now prompts severe distaste and revulsion among those with integrity and self-respect.

3. Lowered dignity of our Legislatures

Legislatures embody the sovereign power of the citizens. Their functioning should reflect the noble and honorable task of deliberating upon collective progress, legislating laws and helping address and solve important public issues. However, legislators employing dilatory and disruptive methods, opposing parties using abusive and unparliamentary language and in some cases, even resorting to outright physical violence during the conduct of legislatures' business have sadly become common. In the eyes of the public, the stature of legislatures and faith in this vital pillar of democracy stand severely reduced.

4. Centralized governance and decision-making process

In a democracy, all power is derived from the people and elected representatives are only its temporary custodians. Public resources too are derived from the citizens. Governance should therefore be centered on the citizens and their welfare. Authority and accountability, taxes and public services and vote and public good must be clearly fused. This can be achieved only through effectively empowered local governments. However, we are currently being governed by a centralized system where all decisions, even for the remotest village, emanate only from Hyderabad or Delhi. Authority is getting concentrated in the hands of chief ministers, district collectors and legislators. The rest of the governance and administrative apparatus displays little trace of accountability, thanks to a system of justified alibis.

5. Politics is divorced from healthcare and education

The quality of healthcare and education determines the quality of one's future life. However, our public healthcare and education system are unable to fulfill their mandate and are rapidly losing people's trust. Right from the primary school up to the university level, our education system is excessively focused on worthless certificates and meaningless percentages. This system is mass-producing graduates who neither are able to support themselves nor fulfill the pressing needs of our society. The standards of even professional and technical education are distressingly low. The primary healthcare system too is in an appalling state of disrepair. Poor citizens are being forced to shell out huge amounts of money in the hope of getting decent quality medical care; one fourth of those hospitalized are dragged below poverty line due to high medical costs.

6. Dalits, Women and Backward Communities are getting a raw deal

Dalits, women and backward communities are still facing societal discrimination that is based entirely on the accident of birth. While long standing caste and communal differences cannot be eliminated overnight, the social and political standing of discriminated communities can certainly be improved. It is the duty of the governance system to enable their economic progress and all-round development leading to the restoration of their dignity. It is an utter disgrace that the present day politics, instead of working towards such noble objectives, is instead cynically using these distressing differences and discrimination towards creating vote banks in the hope of satisfying its own interests.

III. Need for a new political culture

Political system is at a critical juncture

People are left with no real and genuine alternatives

The era of single-party dominance in Indian politics was decisively ended with the historic elections of 1977. The following decades saw numerous political parties being formed across India with the aim of representing and fulfilling aspirations based on religion, community, social groups/castes and even, short lived emotions. The profusion of political parties has led to increased competition among the political players. Arguably, the greatest tragedy of Indian politics has been that this development did not take the shape of a healthy competition where parties compete among themselves by generating real governance alternatives and by offering genuine developmental choices to the voters.

Instead, the competition among these dozens of parties has been focused almost entirely on winning elections by any and all means possible and on capturing political power. Today, in India, all parties can be termed 'parties in power': almost every party is in a ruling alliance in some State or the other! But in their attempts to secure political power by hook or by crook, all parties have become clones of each other. Individual political players – irrespective of their political affiliations, are caught in the vicious cycle of investing crores of rupees to win elections and having to make multiple returns on this investment. Collectively, parties find themselves trapped in this culture of corrupt and debased politics.

In the past, our citizens have repeatedly expressed their strong desire for qualitative change in this situation. In their quest for change, the voters have been regularly defeating even major parties and players in elections, despite the ever-increasing deployment of money-and-muscle power. But, the voters do not have real alternatives and are being forced to choose from among the present set of parties and candidates, all of whom are trapped in the same, vicious political culture. The more the players have changed, the more the political game has remained the same. The established political forces do not have the necessary self-correcting mechanisms and are unable to lead the country out of this serious crisis. Our political system stands at this important juncture.

IV. How do we usher in New Political Culture?

1. A real political alternative must be based on genuine politics

Politics is much bigger, grander and nobler than a mere game of musical chairs to capture power. Genuine politics touches upon every aspect of our lives and is all about harmonizing individual interests with collective progress. Every act that contributes to the betterment of our village, our State and our nation is an act of genuine politics. In fact, the noble and inspiring deeds of Gandhi and Ambedkar are acts of true and genuine politics. An alternate political platform should enable the noble pursuit of genuine politics.

2. A new political party for ushering in New Political Culture

In an electoral democracy, real and meaningful political alternatives can be offered to the people only through new political parties. The New Political Culture of genuine politics too can be ushered in only by the formation of a truly new political party. Such a party must be focused not on the distorted and unnatural game of capturing power, but on transforming the very landscape of politics towards making citizens the true sovereigns. The ushering in and establishment of such a political culture is the only way to safely lead our nation from the present critical juncture. Formation of such a political party is not impossible, but is certainly difficult under the present circumstances. However, as concerned and public-spirited Indians, it is our duty and privilege to strive for the establishment of an alternative political force for bringing in New Political Culture to fulfill this historic necessity.
